

Unknown Armies Rules – Solving Fake Problems with Real Dice

The system is percentile based, so you need two D10s.

Any roll you can make is either **stressed** or **unstressed**. Unstressed rolls are under normal circumstances with plenty of time and reduced pressure. Stressed rolls are under dangerous circumstances with limited time and serious consequences to failure.

- 1) For an unstressed roll, roll the governing stat which the skill falls under. For example, you might have Struggle of 25% under your Body of 50. In a casual sparring match at the gym, you have a 50% chance of success. If you get under your actual skill, you have done particularly well.
- 2) For a stressed roll, you have to get under the skill. You're struggling with a mugger in an alley, so you have a 25% chance of success.
- 3) If you get a result with both dice the same (ie. 11, 22, 33), it is a **match**. Matched successes are particularly good, matched failures particularly bad.
- 4) If you get an 01, you Open A Can of Whoop-Ass (OACOWA – pronounces Uh-Wack-uh-wa). A 00, is Bend Over, Here It Comes Again (BOHICA – pronounced, BO-HICA). These are the best and worst results you can get. Kill an enemy with a perfect head shot. Get your thumb caught in the slide mechanism of your pistol, tearing it open.
- 5) If you do not have a particular skill (like wanting to shoot a gun with no training), you roll under your stat if unstressed or under 15% if stressed.

Wounds and Damage

The DM keeps track of your Wound Points. You have as many as your body skill, but the DM just describes your condition. After all, if someone hits you with a lead pipe, you think "Ow! That really fucking hurt!" not "He can still hit me three more times before I die".

Damage is hand to hand or firearms-style. Hand-to-hand damage means you add the dice you rolled to attack together to determine the damage (eg. I roll 17 under by 25% struggle to punch the mugger. He takes $1+7=8$ damage). Firearms means you just deal the damage rolled (My 17 to hit converts to 17 damage). People kill people, but guns really help.

A weapon adds plus +3 to damage per damage-causing characteristic: it can be **heavy**, **large** or **sharp**. A kitchen knife is sharp (+3). A sword is large and sharp (+6). A chainsaw (BOO-YA!) is heavy, large and sharp (+9).

Special Rules

Focus shifts: You can take a bonus of up to 30% if you declare a focus shift when attacking someone in combat. However, anyone attacking you in the same round gets the same bonus to hit you. This allows regular people to be more effective in dangerous situations, but at greater risk to themselves.

I might have stolen a cop's gun, but have no idea how to use it. His partner hasn't seen me yet, so I risk a focus shift, taking my time and aiming at his back. However, someone shouts a warning to him, and now I am just as vulnerable (more so – given the cop is a competent shot with a +30 bonus, and I am an amateur with the same bonus – hope I pull the trigger first!)

Madness Checks

If you encounter something distressing, it causes a madness check – you roll mind. If you succeed, you gain a hardened notch. If you fail, you gain a failed notch. Success allows you to rationalise the event, failure causes you to temporarily freak out in an appropriate fashion. The more hardened notches you have, the less you need to make stress checks. There are five madness gauges: violence, helplessness, unnatural, self and isolation.

Checks are declared with a rank – for example, I might be asked to make a violence check rank 2 upon finding a dead body. My character is a hardened cop with violence hardened 4 so I don't care. My librarian wife with 0 hardened needs to make a check.

Example checks and ranks are included on the next sheets.

THE VIOLENCE STRESS

You have an instinctive revulsion towards actual violence. It's stressful to hurt others, to watch others get hurt, and to get hurt. This stress also covers the fear of death that everyone suffers from in varying degrees.

SAMPLE VIOLENCE CHECKS

- 1 Be attacked with a weapon—shot at or slashed.
- 2 Witness an act of torture.
- 3 Get shot at random. Be tortured briefly.
- 4 Kill someone in a fight.
- 5 Be present at a massive battle, with hundreds of deaths on both sides.
- 6 Perform an act of torture.
- 7 Deliberately kill a helpless target.
- 8 Get tortured for an hour or longer.
- 9 Witness a brutal mass execution.
- 10 Watch as someone you love is tortured to death.

FAILED VIOLENCE NOTCHES

- 1 At this level, you're superficially fine. Perhaps you're a little edgy whenever a knife in the room happens to be pointing your direction.
- 2 You are very aware of violence, both as it exists and as it is depicted. It strikes you as somewhat odd that so many people don't realize that movie violence is very different from real violence.
- 3 You get alert or uneasy every time you see blood, even badly faked blood in a horror flick or when someone cuts a rare steak. Sometimes you have nightmares about violence you've witnessed.
- 4 You instinctively take a defensive posture whenever there's a loud noise or raised voice nearby. Your nightmares are frequent, and you have a hard time looking at anyone without imagining (if briefly) what you would do at that moment if they attacked you.

HARDENED VIOLENCE NOTCHES

- 1-3 Superficially, you're much like everyone else.
- 4-5 Your attitude towards violence shows on your face when the subject comes up in conversation, unless you work to keep it hidden. It might be intensity, or nervousness, or just a grim silence, depending on how you cope.
- 6-7 Violence is a common feature of your mental landscape. Unlike less-hardened people, you show little reaction at all when it is discussed or depicted in fiction.
- 8-9 Your callousness shows in your every word and expression unless you make a continuous effort to suppress it. Again, the exact tone is up to you: it could be bitter and harsh, feverish and vehement, or icy cold.
- 10 It's not hard for people to realize that the deepest horrors of torture and brutality have become commonplace to you, unless you work very, very hard to keep it hidden—which means you come off as tense and guarded all the time. The death of others, or yourself, has no intrinsic significance. You might prefer to stay alive, but it's only a matter of personal taste. Life, in the abstract, doesn't mean anything.

THE UNNATURAL STRESS

It hurts your brain to think of things that don't belong in your concept of the world. Contemplating infinity for too long, seeing *proof* that sometimes $2 + 2 = 5$, and realizing that magick actually works are all unnatural stresses. It's more subtle and unnerving than Violence. Everyone recognizes that violence exists, even those who are insulated from it. Unnatural stresses don't just attack your idea of safety. They attack your idea of how the universe works.

SAMPLE UNNATURAL CHECKS

- 1 Experience a preternaturally strong *deja vu*.
- 2 See a creature or machine that cannot logically exist.
- 3 Realize that a vision you had of the future has come true.
- 4 See convincing proof that $2+2$ does not equal 4.
- 5 Be successfully attacked with magick.
- 6 See someone you know killed by magick, without any visible or "rational" cause.
- 7 Have a conversation with a loved one whom you know is dead.
- 8 See an animal with human features.
- 9 See the dead rise.
- 10 Realize that the reason you and your husband of ten years have never had children is that he's not really a human being.

FAILED UNNATURAL NOTCHES

- 1 At this level it's pretty hard to tell. Perhaps you become a little superstitious—reading your horoscope daily, watching for “lucky” numbers, avoiding cracks in the sidewalk, *etc.*
- 2 You have a few nightmares, and you are suspicious of and/or fascinated by occult and religious books, places, paraphernalia, and people.
- 3 You frequently feel like you're being watched, even when there's no one around. Sometimes it seems like you hear voices in “white noise”—sounds like the wind in the trees, the sloshing of a washing machine, or the noises of traffic.
- 4 The nightmares are frequent, and often you don't know you're dreaming until you jerk awake. Sometimes you feel like there's someone—or *something*—watching you and you can almost see it out of the corner of your eye. When you whip your head around, there's nothing there.

HARDENED UNNATURAL NOTCHES

- 1-3 There's little to distinguish you from the average person, except perhaps a tendency to snort derisively when someone mentions their "intuitions."
- 4-5 You tend to listen very closely and intently when someone discusses the paranormal or supernatural, trying to figure out if they know something or if they're just talking trash.
- 6-7 You now know and accept that there are vast, incomprehensible forces governing the universe. It strikes you as odd when people act as if they're in control of their lives; you know better.
- 8-9 Things that average people consider "meaningless coincidences" strike you as deeply, intensely funny

UNKNOWN ARMIES

because you see the connections that they do not. You may develop a reputation for laughing inappropriately.

- 10 You are no longer surprised by violations of ordinary logic. Everything is "normal" to you—talking to eggs, spontaneous combustion, and signature one as ordinary and sensible as cars, dogs, and rain.

THE HELPLESSNESS STRESS

A sense of control is essential for feelings of safety, even when it's completely unmerited. When you have been challenged by helplessness, you can lose your ability to gauge how "in control" of a situation you are; you may feel powerless when the situation is not completely lost, or you may ignore real impediments from a misplaced sense of capability.

SAMPLE HELPLESSNESS CHECKS

- 1 Unintentionally humiliate yourself in public.
- 2 Get fired from a job you love.
- 3 Fail at something when it's *imperative* that you succeed.
- 4 Get dumped into a pit of maggots.
- 5 Spend a month in jail.
- 6 Watch a videotape of your spouse committing adultery.
- 7 Be placed in a situation where you have to either saw off one of your limbs or die.
- 8 Watch someone you love die.
- 9 Watch someone you love die because you tried to save them and failed.
- 10 Be possessed, yet conscious, as your body commits unspeakable acts against your will.

FAILED HELPLESSNESS NOTCHES

- 1 **At this level you're fairly normal.** Perhaps you're a little finicky or meticulous, trying to eliminate the possibility of something going wrong.
- 2 **You have a tendency to get unreasonably nervous and pessimistic** when small things go wrong. You may be irritated if a bus is just a few minutes late, or if your computer freezes up.
- 3 **You have an intense dislike for surprises, even good ones.** They remind you of the essentially unpredictable nature of reality, and that scares and annoys you.
- 4 **You find it very difficult to trust anything.** Your friends, your own abilities, even your memories could be false, waiting to betray you. You have a tendency towards obsessive-compulsive behaviors such as checking the door to your house two or three (or more) times every time you leave to make absolutely certain it's locked. You attempt to be prepared for every eventuality.

HARDENED HELPLESSNESS NOTCHES

- 1-3 You don't have any major behavior or attitude shifts yet, just minor things. You tend to be pessimistic and fatalistic, perhaps.
- 4-6 Your fatalism has increased. When things go wrong in a big, bad way, or when trouble comes from a completely unexpected or unlikely source, you handle it with a remarkable lack of affect. (This is not necessarily incongruent with the behaviors of 2+ failed notches: it's perfectly possible to be freakishly calm about big things and freakishly upset about little things.)

- 7-9 You have a boundless faith in the ability of chaos to screw you over. You can easily believe that even the most suspicious of mishaps is simple random chance. "So my brake cable snapped and my gas pedal got stuck down to the floor. What makes you think some one tinkered with my car? Shit happens!"
- 10 The distinction between "intentional" and "accidental" is pretty much lost on you. Maybe you believe that everything is completely predestined, or maybe you believe that everything in the world happens due to chance. The one thing you find hard to swallow is the idea that we are the captives of our fates.

THE ISOLATION STRESS

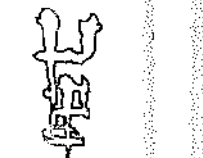
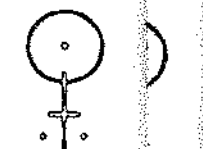
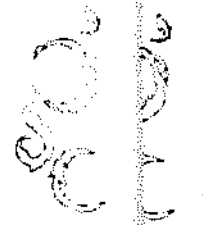
Isolation is a subtle danger: it corrodes your sanity by denying you input. You rely on other human beings for feedback. Without the opinions of others, you do not know how to judge yourself. When you become resistant to isolation, you overlook social mores and unwritten rules because you've forgotten how to conform to the expectations of others. If you've suffered from isolation, you become very needy. These are not mutually exclusive: it's possible to be very clingy and still be unable to pick up hints about when your behavior is unacceptable.

SAMPLE ISOLATION CHECKS

- 1 Spend a day without seeing anyone you know.
- 2 Spend five hours in a sensory-deprivation tank.
- 3 Spend three days without talking to another human being.
- 4 Be institutionalized by someone you love and trust.
- 5 Spend a week in solitary confinement.
- 6 See someone you thought you knew intimately behaving in a fashion completely contrary to her normal behavior.
- 7 Spend a month in a country where no one speaks your language and where you can't make yourself understood no matter how hard you try.
- 8 Be deeply, painfully, and violently betrayed by someone you love.
- 9 Be treated like a stranger by your closest friends.
- 10 Spend a month in a sensory-deprivation tank.

FAILED ISOLATION NOTCHES

- 1 You can interact in society and get through your everyday life with no real problems. You're maybe a little shy with people at first, but you feel a kind of gratitude whenever a new acquaintance doesn't reject you.
- 2 You're a bit nervous around new people, eager to make a good impression. This could be expressed as shyness or through "chatterbox" behaviors.
- 3 If you sleep alone, you sometimes suffer from insomnia. Perhaps you don't like silence when you're by yourself, and always keep a television on or a radio playing. Sometimes, when you're not paying attention, you talk to yourself or think out loud.
- 4 Sometimes when you're isolated (either all by yourself or surrounded by strangers) you have panic attacks—a sense of intangible, impending doom. Your skin flushes, your breath becomes rapid and labored, you sweat. Simply put, you show the signs of being in mortal danger, when there is no danger around.



HARDENED ISOLATION NOTCHES

- 1-3 There are no really obvious signs of your experiences. Perhaps you're a little standoffish or curt.
- 4-5 You can be unthinkingly rude, breaking in during the middle of a conversation before someone's done speaking, scratching yourself in an indelicate fashion, or telling the truth when it isn't diplomatic to do so. (For example, you might blurt out "*Damn* that's an ugly haircut!" instead of saying "Wow, that's a new look for you, isn't it?")
- 6-7 You lack patience with people who don't immediately understand what you're trying to tell them. Your natural inclination is to repeat the same explanations (which are obvious to you) over and over, or just give up. (This is just your first impulse; it can, of course, be overcome if you pay extra attention. In game terms, this means that your Charm or Explain skills aren't penalized any time you make a roll, but you might have a little bit of trouble in casual situations.)
- 8-9 Unless you're concentrating, you lack dialogue skills. You don't like it when people interrupt, but you frequently interrupt others. You also don't see the point of a lot of social conventions such as clothing, grooming, etc. You might still shave every day, but it all seems a little silly.
- 10 At some level, you not only don't care what people think about you: you can't understand how anyone could care. You are very aware that people are inherently alone, that we can never really understand anyone or communicate anything but the most rudimentary ideas and feelings. You know everyone is an island, in the final analysis. Especially you.

THE SELF STRESS

This is the trickiest one. It's your guilt and self-loathing, but it's more than that. A major stress is when you find out you're not the person you thought you were, by breaking a promise you honestly meant to keep, or by standing idly by when your values (or what you *thought* were your values) are desecrated. It's your sense of alienation from self that provides, perhaps, the deepest terror. Where other meters measure how traumatized you are by things that happen to you, Self measures how traumatized you are by your own reactions to those things. To put it another way, the only thing you can ever really be 100% sure of is "I think, therefore I am." The Self meter measures how uncertain you are about the "I" in that statement.

SAMPLE SELF CHECKS

- 1 Break a minor promise.
- 2 Be confronted with proof that your self-image is incorrect. ("I'm very responsible; I'm sure I've called you back every time I said I would." "Actually, you've blown me off so many times I started keeping track in my journal. Lessee, November 19, December 3 . . . again on December 17 . . . January 9 . . .")
- 3 Secretly gratify an urge that is unacceptable to your upbringing and background. (Spit on a cross if Christian, date a person of another race if raised in a racist home, have a homosexual affair if you come from a homophobic background, etc.)

- 4 Lie to conceal some aspect of your personality from a close friend or loved one who trusts you implicitly.
- 5 Decide not to act on an impulse from your Noble stimulus (see p. 34) because it's "too dangerous."
- 6 Deliberately deceive someone you love in a way that is certain to cause them terrible pain if they find out.
- 7 Discover that you have inadvertently committed an act of cannibalism.
- 8 Deliberately act completely contrary to your Noble impulse.
- 9 Kill someone you love.
- 10 Deliberately destroy everything you've risked your life to support.

FAILED SELF NOTCHES

- 1 You don't have any real kinks yet, but every now and again you feel a sense of dissociation, an eerie moment when you feel alienated from your own character and motivations. "Sure, I know I'm Greg Stolze," you might think, "but who's Greg Stolze?"
- 2 The "who am I?" moments come more frequently. You tend to become introspective whenever someone mentions "truth" or "lies" or "promises."
- 3 Half the time your words and actions feel oddly forced, fake, or rehearsed to you—as if, rather than yourself, you were an actor playing the role of you.
- 4 You frequently feel like you're watching your every action from the outside. You have little or no sense of will or volition: it's as if you're a passive observer, along for the ride while your body goes through the motions.

HARDENED SELF NOTCHES

- 1-3 There are few external signs of your interior struggle: people may sometimes find you to be a little brittle or "phony"-seeming.
- 4-5 Even when you're telling the truth, people often think you're lying, unless you make a particular effort to act "natural."
- 6-7 You've lost a sense of connection to those who were previously close to you. You can predict the actions of your friends, relatives, or lovers, but you no longer know exactly what you feel about them.
- 8-9 Half the time, you only know you're telling the truth if you take a minute to think about it. Truth and lies aren't nearly as important as they used to be—back before you quit lying to yourself . . .
- 10 Life has been pared down to the essentials for you: you no longer have opinions about music, food, or fashion. You've lost the ability to enjoy or dislike things, because there's so little "you" there to interact.

GETTING CALLOUS

Cops, coroners, and social workers know about getting callous. When you've seen enough horror, it loses its power to horrify you. The more hardened notches you have on a single meter, the more it takes for that kind of stress to rip up your head. Once you resist *ten* incidents on a meter—that is, all ten hardened notches on that gauge are filled in—you're so jaded and blasé about it that *nothing* in that category of stress can endanger your mind.

UNKNOWN
ARMIES