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GM TOOLS: CLOCKS

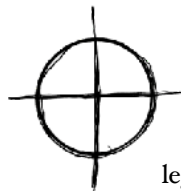
Overview

Clocks are used to track when a *situation changes*. There are an almost limitless number of things which might be defined as a "situation", but **clocks** can handle them all. In this section we will cover

- ◆ what clocks are
- ◆ how to use clocks
- ◆ when not to use clocks
- ◆ alternatives to clocks
- ◆ foreshadowing and its importance

After that, you can insert clocks as you please into your story, whether they be for tracking character or adversary statuses, changes in the narrative, threats, or anything else you can think of. Clocks are **mostly for the GM to manage**, and so while players need to know what they are, they will often be *reacting* to them rather than managing them.

WHAT ARE • CLOCKS



In the most basic iteration of the game, any threat or obstruction or problem can be overcome simply by using a skill to narrate an appropriate outcome. That is a perfectly legitimate way to run the game. What clocks do is offer a more detailed means of tracking either **progress**, or **threat**.

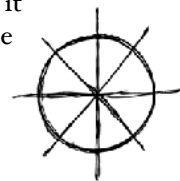
A clock is just that: a circle divided by a number of lines in order to make up **segments**. Usually, these segments count toward an **outcome** of some sort: but importantly it's an outcome which will **dramatically change the narrative**.

So if characters are tracking their health by a clock, when the clock is filled, they might fall unconscious, flee from a battle, or even die. The point being that *the narrative changes* in a dramatic sense.

Clocks can be any size, but smaller ones tend to be better:



- ◆ a **2-segment clock**, basically a circle divided in half, is very simple, easy to draw, but has somewhat limited application precisely because it doesn't involve much more than a roll; in fact, a strong outcome may complete it in one go
- ◆ a **4-segment clock** is easy to track, simple to see and explain, and also easy to draw; further, an event being tracked will happen fairly quickly, but still usually takes a few tests to complete
- ◆ a **6-segment clock** is also easy to track and to draw, and is appropriate for something which isn't imminent, or is a little more serious
- ◆ an **8-segment clock** will take noticeably longer (remember, it's double a 4-segment clock), and is usually used to track very dangerous or highly sophisticated outcomes
- ◆ a **10-or-more-segment clock** is huge, and will often take multiple sessions to complete unless the Party are actively seeking to smash it out in one go; this might even be some kind of campaign goal



Which clock do I use?

The answer is: the one which works the best for what it's tracking. In most cases, a **4-segment clock** will do nicely, and is a good place to start.

Only use bigger clocks when there's more at stake, or it's a much harder task.

Progress and threat clocks

Remember that clocks can be a result of things that the Party **are actively pursuing (progress)**, and they can just as often be **a consequence waiting to happen (threat)**.

When a player says something like, *my character is going to find out where to get information on the urchin who robbed us*, if the answer is simple or not important, there's no need to even create a clock. But if there is, there's two ways to go about setting it up.

The first is the **progress** clock, which might be called **The Urchin Is Captured**. It tracks the Party's own progress, so *strong* and *weak* outcomes will tick off segments (usually 2, and 1, respectively), until the clock is filled and the urchin is caught.

But it might also be a **threat** clock, and instead might be called **The Urchin Gets Away**. That's a bad outcome, and possibly a real problem depending on the context. In this case, *weak* and *bad* outcomes (as well as actions which don't contribute to that outcome) might contribute segments instead.

Either way, *when a clock is involved, one single roll won't usually cut it*; by creating a clock, the GM is saying that the urchin is hard to find for a reason, and that's likely to take time.

Competitive clocks

Alternatively, if the Party get in a bind and are fleeing some guards, it might not be a matter of just escaping quickly; it could be a chase. There might be **two clocks involved**, one which is called **Escape!** and the other which is called **Captured!** In this case, strong outcomes move the escape clock forward, and bad outcomes shift the captured clock forward. Weak outcomes... well, that's up to the character; perhaps they succeed at leaping that rooftop, but they make noise, and so the captured clock moves. Or, they fall and injure themselves, but quietly; the escape clock moves forward. Whichever is filled first determines the longer-term narrative consequences.

Passive and background clocks

The GM also has an option to use clocks to track attitudes or background events outside of the direct focus of the characters' lives.

Let's say a character interacts with the Captain of the Guard, and tries to bribe them, perhaps the GM thinks, *there's a chance this captain is offended by this, and starts to pay attention to this character being corrupt*, and so starts a clock called **Captain's Suspicion**. If they keep behaving in ways which will attract the Captain's attention they could be arrested or have a bounty placed on their head.

In other words **clocks are very flexible**. They can be used for almost anything, and even using a 4-segment clock all the time still results in some tense moments. GMs should try to **show clocks** as often as possible, but there may be occasional moments when it's more exciting for the Party not to be able to see it, or how many

segments are there. But it's often more tense for the players to see exactly what's happening.

Too many clocks?

While clocks are a fantastic tool, don't use them for every test or situation, or it will draw the game out. The things clocks are best used for are:

- ◆ tracking NPC attitudes and opinions
- ◆ counting down to catastrophe
- ◆ flagging when a threat or consequence might be near, and care is best taken to avoid it
- ◆ measuring some kind of resource or resilience
- ◆ generating a sense of tension from pursuit

Many of the key tenets of the basic system are appropriate here, too. So, if there's no **drama**, or **stakes**, dial it back. With clocks, the main thing to consider for GMs is:

Will this help increase tension, or illustrate an ongoing threat or potential consequence?

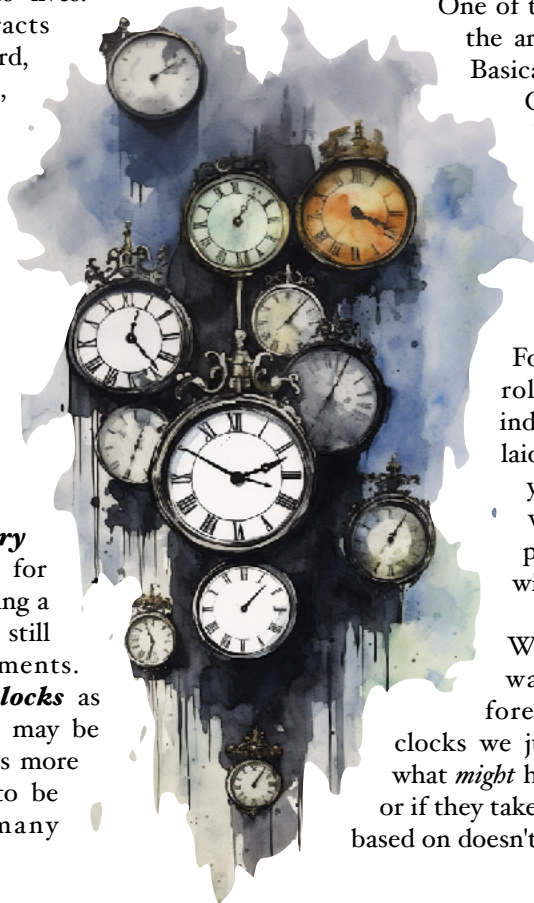
If the answer is **no**, then don't use a clock. Just resolve it with a single test and move on.

GM • FORESHADOWING

One of the true skills of GMing any game is the art of what is called **foreshadowing**. Basically, it is a skill which enables the GM to suggest what might happen before it actually does. Think of it like the "big bad" or most important threat casts a shadow over what is happening before they even appear. That's literally what the word refers to.

Foreshadowing can be hard. Because role-playing games involve dice and independent thought, sometimes well-laid plans can go awry and especially if you're encouraging player input (as we are in this game), how can we possibly foreshadow what is to come with any accuracy? It might change!

While that is very true, there are some ways that **clocks can help** with foreshadowing. Consider the passive clocks we just talked about: they can suggest what *might* happen if the Party don't take action, or if they take risky action. Which one the clock is based on doesn't really matter, because it's *suggesting a*



threat which may or may not even happen.

In the example above, the Captain of the Guard had been offered a bribe, which turned into a clock called **Captain's Suspicion**. While that's a handy tool for the GM to use to track how suspicious the guard is, consider that it **also tells the players what will happen if they continue to behave a certain way**. It *foreshadows* the intrusion of the Captain of the Guard if they keep attracting attention to themselves.

HUNGER GAMES

Each day, one **RATION** must be consumed per person (both PCs and NPCs).

Any character who doesn't eat becomes **hungry**. This happens on the *first segment* of a new day. If a character is already **hungry** and cannot eat, they become **exhausted**; NPCs will collapse at this point, and likely starve if they do not eat within the following day or so.

If a character is already **exhausted** and still cannot eat, they suffer a **SCAR**.

Which is great, because that actually does some work *for you*. You don't need to say, *careful about undertaking that nefarious act, the Captain might find out*. Instead, if they roll a bad outcome (or you could offer it is an option on a weak outcome, too), you can have an NPC say, *the Captain of the Guard will hear about this!* and your players will remember, "oh yeah, the clock... that's not good".

The clock behaves as a version of what we will discuss next, what is called a **soft move**. Only, like the difference between a test and a clock, it just takes longer to happen. When the clock is complete, the GM gets to have some real fun, and make a **hard move**.

SOFT & HARD • GM MOVES

Another aspect of **foreshadowing** which can, and should, be used to flag impending events, are what are called **soft** and **hard** moves. These are GM actions which occur as the narrative demands.

They are a means of flagging to the players that **something is about to happen**, and the **soft** move is

the first step in that process. That is, a soft move is more of a **suggestion**, a possibility which has not yet come to pass. The players will usually **react** to a soft move: that's the point, because it's not much fun if they get no warning. However, if a soft move is ignored, the GM can proceed to a **hard** move.

A **hard** move is essentially just the consequence of ignoring a soft move. It becomes **a narrative fact**, and simply happens. There need be no mechanics behind it, though one possible result of a **weak**, or especially a **bad, outcome**, is that the GM can make a **hard move**.

In most cases this will have followed from a previously stated soft move. However, a **bad outcome** in particular may demand something nasty happening out of the blue.

Soft Move: The Warning

Typically, a soft move will sound like a **suggestion or a possibility**. It often ends with a question, such as, *what do you do?* Or perhaps, *how do you react?*

The players then have a choice; to immediately respond to the **soft move** by taking specific action (and, usually, making a **test**, but not always), or deciding to ignore it and take a different action entirely. It is quite possible that players may have **two soft moves** to deal with at the same time, and therefore may be deciding between the lesser of two evils.

A soft move may sound something like:

- ◆ *you tear into the ogre's flesh with your attack, but it is distracted by the bright spell just being cast, and lumbers menacingly toward the wizard, how do you respond?*
- ◆ *the ghoul knocks your weapon away, which slides out of your grasp; you'll need to leap to recover it! But the cliff beneath you also begins to tremble, and you can feel how unsteady the earth is beginning to feel, what do you do?*
- ◆ *as you are talking to the captain of the guard, several militia men begin to take their places in a subtle circle around the group; do you respond to this?*

Hard Move: The Consequence

In many cases, the Party will recognise the approaching threat and respond accordingly. If that happens, the **soft move** is essentially dealt with, or at the very least the **narrative moves on** because they have taken action themselves. So there's drama, or stakes, or threat, and *the players engaged with it*. That makes the story interesting.

If the players *ignore a soft move*, however, that requires the GM to take action of their own. In fact, the best way to think about a *hard move* is that the players have given you a reason to do so by ignoring a soft move.

In other words, *make a threat* in the form of a soft move (like the examples above), and if the players don't react, you *follow through with consequence as the narrative demands*.

So, to re-use the soft move examples, a hard move may resolve something like:

- ◆ *the fighter continues to attack the ogre, but as they do, it lumbers toward the wizard, and picks them up by the throat, dealing harm, and tossing them to the ground, prone. The furious ogre looks very much set to stomp on the wizard every chance it gets.*
- ◆ *You grab the weapon you dropped, but the cliff gives way, and both you and the ghoul you were fighting plummet as the ground gives way beneath you; falling a dozen metres into the river below, you take 3-harm ap and will struggle to even keep your head above water in your medium armour. By the way, ghouls are great swimmers.*
- ◆ *You convince the captain of the guard that you are who you say you are, but several of the militia won't hear it. They begin to push in close, and the captain says, "honestly, I believe you... but it doesn't matter that you live around here; nobody gets through without paying the price, so let's talk about that, shall we?" The militia are a medium sized group who outnumber you, so there's almost no way you can escape a fracas without a lot of blood being spilled; a fair bit of it likely your own.*

So each of these outcomes plays off the suggestion of the soft move which set it up. The threat is laid down (*here is what will likely happen*), and followed through if it is ignored (*it has just happened*). Note that in several examples *harm* was inflicted because it was appropriate to the situation. While *harm* isn't always necessary, don't shy away from inflicting it if it makes sense. Remember that *harm* can target *poise* as well as *blood*.

This process becomes a fantastic way to introduce threat in a situation which otherwise may not seem threatening. As with the clock for a crumbling temple, if that was too complicated or unnecessary, the GM could just as easily make it a soft move: *as you pass into the room, you feel a rumbling and the ceiling begins to crack and dust begins to fall; what do you do?*

If the players ignore that, they're asking for trouble. The GM may have a different agenda for introducing it depending on the context: perhaps they want to

add some danger to an otherwise mundane location; perhaps they want to force the players to commit to going deeper into the temple, or retreating; perhaps the Party are being pursued and it's a chance to separate them from whoever it hunting them.

MORE CLOCKS & TRACKS

An alternative to a clock is simply a *track*. It's the same system, the same information, only it's displayed in a linear form rather than a circular one.

Here's a **4-segment** track:

4-segment Track				
TRK	I	II	III	IV

Instead of colouring in a segment of a clock, colour in a box instead. That's the *only* difference. Using clocks or tracks is simply an aesthetic choice.

There are various other uses for both clocks and tracks. Remember, these are *options*, not hard rules; if you think they'll work well, use them. If not, just ignore them.

More clocks or tracks means keeping an eye on more things, but it can also add a lot of tension, depending on *what kind of game you want to play*. That's what the rules are for: making that game happen. So take and use what you need, and ditch the rest.

For the sake of simplicity, the term **clock** will be used going forward, but any clock can also be a track.

Various **threats** or other events run on clocks as well. These are called **absolute clocks**, **conditional clocks**, and **narrative clocks**.

Absolute Clocks

These are expressed as "in X time Y will happen". So, for example, "in one day the enemy army will arrive" would set an eight-segment clock which progresses at the same pace as the day itself. Each **TIME** that passes pushes the clock forward by one unit.

A way of *randomising* such clocks to add tension is to set up an **8-track clock**, conveniently the same as a single day, and having a player roll **1d6** to see how many segments *are already filled in*. Maybe it's only

one or two, but if it's five or six, they'd best get going *now*.

Conditional Clocks

These are similar to absolute clocks, except that they progress only under specific conditions. The most common example of this, appropriately, are **conditions**. These clocks are expressed as "after **X-TIME** spent *at rest*, it will recover". Each unit of time rested therefore fills one clock segment. Here, "at rest" is just an example. It might also be "without addressing the problem", or "while the vizier remains free".

Other examples might be threat clocks which only advance when the characters take particular actions, such as "after X interactions with Y, then Z will take place". These are better used when the action itself is the risk, rather than *not* taking action, as the previous examples were.

Narrative Clocks

These are a measure of time based on *narrative* events rather than absolute ones. Any relevant consequence of an action or test can add the following option:

- ◆ add a tick to a **narrative clock**

This allows a GM to track imminent threats and bring them to the fore.

Examples of a narrative clock might be:

- ◆ a **nemesis** will appear, or one of their **agents**, to confront the Party
- ◆ someone the Party needs to talk to escapes, or leaves their location, is killed, or becomes otherwise unavailable
- ◆ the Party's city comes under siege by the approaching enemy army (remember, many threats can be either narrative or absolute)

The specifics don't matter all that much—this system is merely a measure of how close a thing the Party *doesn't* want to happen is to happening.

And so the players will then need to decide how often they can afford to rest up, or waste time. It's in their hands.

Foreshadowing

It is very important to foreshadow consequences this way, and use segments on the clock to indicate when

the narrative will change to show how close the threat is. Not everything needs to have a clock, and not everything that has a clock needs to be life-threatening. It could just mean a change of state, such as "the rain will arrive", or "the feast will end".

But what it will do is give the players a sense of constant change, and often also a sense of threat in ways they may not have expected.

If a clock represents a threat, it may be best to simply allude to the threat at first. Characters who are particularly curious may make a test—perhaps **INVESTIGATION** or **PERCEPTION**—to see if they can work it out in advance. And if they succeed, that gives them more time to react, or a better sense of the threat at hand.

Usually, once the players are aware that there even *is* a clock in play, and they've identified what it is, be clear of the count-down and how many segments there are. They can plan around it; but part of the tension will be included in the very fact that there's a countdown at all.

Example

A GM creates a six-segment threat clock called "*the temple will collapse*". The Party are currently exploring it and have no idea it's so unstable (at least, not at first).

Segment one, there's a distant rumbling and some dust and debris falls from the ceiling, covering armour and making someone sneeze or cough.

Segment two, there's a clear rumbling, and a huge thunderous crack as something really heavy falls in the distance. The Party all feel the temple shake noticeably, but it quickly recedes.

Segment three, parts of the ceiling regularly crack and fall; nothing dangerous yet, but the characters are constantly getting struck in the head by little stones or bits of debris.

Segment four, part of the ceiling in a nearby room collapses, and is enough to show a visible crack forming in the wall of wherever the Party currently are. There's a thin film of dust in every room now, and it is becoming a little difficult to breathe.

Segment five, the temple begins to tremble almost constantly, the cracking and rumbling sounds get nearer and closer, and some parts of the temple might even be closed off to them because of recent rubble. It should become clear that it's about to seriously collapse.



Segment six, the walls begin to groan and are cracking in almost every room they're in. There's a tremendous roar and a deafening *whump* as the temple foundations finally fail. The room they are in has survived largely in tact, but the roof is shedding bits of rubble and the whole place is filled with heavy dust. If there was light coming from outside, it's gone.

This process could alternatively be contracted down to **two or three main points**, so that not every segment has an event. Or, if it's a longer-term thing, it might be a ten-segment clock. In this case, the main questions the GM needs to think about are things like *whether the Party can survive* at all, or if this is merely a *setback or barrier* to some other option.

Make it as clear as possible to the players *what the consequences are*; if the players casually hand-wave the collapse as no big deal and the GM says nothing... but then kills them all when the building collapses, that might not be all that fun. But if they know when the event is revealed, say in segment three, that collapse means *death*—that's right, *death!*—it will really ramp up the pressure.

The point is to emphasise what is happening and **foreshadow** the collapse of the temple. It should make the players want to rush, to literally beat the clock. This gives an otherwise static location its own sense of urgency, which can really ramp up the drama.

By the time they get to the fourth or fifth segment, they simply *cannot afford* to rest or waste **TIME** at all, if they want to get out before the thing collapses on them (regardless of whether it's a mortal threat or merely an impediment).

Summary: Clocks

A **clock** can be used for almost anything. It keeps track of things which are likely to *change* over time, or to **foreshadow** future events. Clocks can be between two and eight or even ten **segments** in size.

Clocks can be used for many things:

- ◆ to reflect the relative *challenge* of an **adversary**
- ◆ to track the Party's **progress** toward a goal
- ◆ to keep tabs on how close a **threat** may be, how strong it has grown, or when it will act
- ◆ a **competition** between two groups; whoever fills their clock up first wins
- ◆ to track **passive** or **background** events, such as weather or the passing of time

It's really important to remember the most important rule when it comes to clocks:

Only use them if they are useful. If you don't need a clock, don't use one!