In the Judge Dredd RPG, specialist Psi-Judges are arguably the most intriguing and enjoyable characters you can play. In this article, Carl Sargent looks at the psychology of these mavericks, at aspects of game balance as they affect Psi-Judges, and at their Special Abilities.

The Psychology of the Psi-Judge

First and foremost, Psi-Judges are rarities, freaks, mavericks. Psi talents are rare in Mega-City One, and the attitude of judicial authority to people with psi talents is ambivalent. More than one psyker has been subjected to neurosurgery to eradicate his abilities and Psi-Judges will not be unaware of this. On the other hand, Psi-Judges are greatly valued by authority, as they can be of unequalled use in the very toughest cases Judges ever have to face (notably in facing the Dark Judges). Still, Psi-Judges know the highest authorities — and their other fellow Judges — are unsure of them, and this must affect the way they feel about their role.

As Psi-Judges are rare, they are in some sense outsiders; yet they pry into the minds of others continually. And what they find there is usually evil, depraved, corrupt. All this, plus their fellows' ambivalent attitudes to them, could easily lead to them becoming severely alienated people, and this is reflected in their unconventional personalities. To stave off the depression and despair which could be produced by these pressures, most Psi-Judges are flippant, wisecracking, irreverent (who but Judge Anderson could get away with saying goodbye to Dredd with the line "See you later, adjudicator"?), even hypomanic. These traits are necessary survival mechanisms, and even the SJS recognises this. It is very rare for a Psi-Judge to be hassled by the SJS over lax law-keeping, for example. Psi-Judges are under pressures other Judges cannot understand and due allowances are made. It is even rumoured that Psi-Judges have a dark secret known only to them, the Chief Justice and head of the SJS, and the few Med-Judges involved in a supervisory role. Every so often the pressures on a Psi-Judge build...
up to such a level of tension that therapeutic psi-storming sessions are needed so that Judges liberate dammed-up psychic energy and tensions in an uncontrolled manner, through telekinetic actions, illusion generation and similar release mechanisms. If this runs out of control, then it is one of Mega-City One’s best-kept secrets.

Pai-Judges have one other outstanding feature: they are physically weak. In the JD game, if the dice have been honestly rolled, over 90% of player character Psi-Judges will have S=1. This means they are no where near mortal. One Wound means automatic exclusion from many adventures and while the chance of death from one Wound may be small, the cumulative chances of getting crooked by a successful hit get depressingly high after a while. This has ramifications for game balance, as we’ll see, but it must affect the psychology of the Psi-Judge too. Psi-Judges should be defensive, cautious, concerned with their physical safety more than any other Judges. Although the Judge’s Book notes GMs should award EPs for “being a good, brave Judge”, Psi-Judges should not be brave. They won’t be looking for a fight in with Lawless Runner blazings, frankly, a dumb way for Psi-Judges to behave. They are too valuable to be wasted like this! Note also Psi-Judges’ awareness of their physical vulnerability. Role-playing is essential, only second to their darkly-humoristic wisecracking.

Role-playing of Psi-Judges should reflect the tensions, the concerns for physical safety, the outsider status of these people. In the 22nd Century world of Mega-City One, Psi-Judges really are strangers in a strange land.

Game Balance with Psi-Judges

Here, I’ll look at the problem of the physical vulnerability of Psi-Judges as it affects game balance. In my experience, at least, the viability of Judges with S=1 is rather weak, if they get involved in show downs, they are all too easily taken out by the one single bad die roll. Now, for players this is a shame — a character shouldn’t be so vulnerable to such effects arising from one piece of bad luck — and players will get frustrated if their Psi-Judges are sidelined too much. Within the world of Mega-City One, such extreme physical vulnerability might well lead Justice Central to be very wary of ever letting Psi-Judges out on regular street patrol duties. They are too rare to expose to the danger of getting blown away by some two-bit punk with a stub gun. But, of course, the players want their Psi-Judges out there, earning EPs.

This is quite a problem, but there are three ways around this which occur on first reflection. One is to revise the determination of S rolls for Judges so no Judges have S=1. This is too drastic an option for me to feel happy with; it would affect the balance quite dramatically. A second option would be to make Judges harder to hit at all by plugging an odd gap in the JD rules. Judges wear head and limb armour, although we are told in the Judge’s Book (p257) that “perps may wear it over other areas too.” A third option would be to make the Judges go around at least with the extra additional protection of chest armour (the futuristic equivalent of the contemporaneous bullet-proof vest). This, again, would have to be an option open to all Judges, thus affecting game balance rather dramatically unless a compensating penalty could be found which ordinary Judges would find limiting, but which Psi-Judges would find acceptable. Thus the Judges make first two options might not be advisable courses of action for the GM.

The third option is to build some protection into the game against the pitfalls of having S=1 which is only available to Psi-Judges. It becomes obvious the only way of doing this is by designing some additional Special Ability related to Psi, so that it is only available to Psi-Judges. One such ability, Metabolic Control, is described at the end of the next section, which fills in some details for Special Abilities for Psi-Judges that GMs might wish to consider as optional rule modifications.

There remains one important aspect to the case, within the rules, that Psi-Judges can be psi-immune, since initial PS score, and the 10% immunity chance, are rolled separately. Thus, it only need increase the physical resilience of Psi-Judges with some extra rules, then a psi-immune Psi-Judge is going to be too powerful. Indeed, the immense possibility of Psi-Judges being psi-immune seems distinctly dodgy on theoretical grounds. I would suggest GMs consider seriously that any Judge with a PS-related Special Ability cannot also be psi-immune. Thus make the 10% roll for immunity only after all other stats have been rolled, and dispense with it if the character qualifies for specialist Psi-Judge or a PS-based Special Ability and the player takes this option.

Special Abilities for Psi-Judges

GMs might wish to consider the following suggested guidelines for use of Special Abilities by Psi-Judges; these are only suggestions and GMs will be aware that extra details about these abilities can be found in the GM’s Book which supplement those in the Judge’s Book. My aim is to sharpen up certain aspects of how these abilities might be used in actual play, so that GMs and players have a clearer idea of exactly what they can, and can’t do with them.

Animate Corpse

I think it is implicit in the rules, but the GM might make this an explicit rule, that only one corpse can be controlled by a Psi-Judge at any one time. The corpse should not be permitted to use any Special Abilities it possessed in its former life, since it no longer has the intelligence to deploy them. Likewise, the GM may care to rule that the corpse can rely on matter-of-fact queries, any query calling for a judgement to be made or viewed to the point of being expressed (such as “What do you think Norbert the Gink is doing right now?”) will simply confuse the zombie-like remaining intelligence and the corpse will be unable to reply.

Detect Intent

As noted in the rulebooks, this is a vaguely defined ability and its application calls for much thought on the GM’s part. It might be ruled to operate differently in interrogation situations on the one hand and on the streets on the other.

If the ability is being used in an interrogation exercise, then the Psi-Judge rolls against PS to exercise the ability as usual. However, the target of the psi-control roll against its PS to resist. The Psi-Judge can do this again, after a 10 Turn delay, but the second attempt will be made with a -10% modifier or +10% to the target’s resistance chances. Likewise, after another 10 Turn delay, if the Psi-Judge has had no luck so far, a third attempt with a -20% modifier can be made. After this time, however, the Psi-Judge cannot succeed in overcoming the target’s resistance no matter how many more attempts are made (the target has learned how to defend itself successfully against the Psi-Judge; but a different Psi-Judge could try weekly. Without such a system, the Psi-Judge is certain to succeed eventually; with such a system the odds are in the Psi-Judge’s favour, but there’s a chance the target won’t crack.

There’s also the matter of what the Psi-Judge learns — and the issue of timing. Although the ability can only be used once per 10 Turns there seems to be no reason why the link cannot persist indefinitely once it has been established, within the rules as they stand. These ideas are merely speculative and the GM may re-establish it after a 10 Turn delay if a roll against his PS is successful (this time, the target cannot resist).

These suggestions call for interpretation by the GM as to what might be ‘predominant’ in the target’s mind and so on, but this nebulous ability can’t be played without some such decisions being made.

Again, while this ability is usually used for the kind of interrogations and PS drugs and the like haven’t worked, such scenarios don’t exhaust the possible uses of the ability. It can also be used on the streets; eg, in surveillance of perps hunkered down in a derelict back, for example.

For game balance, I suggest target does not get a chance to resist unless a Psyker (since the probe is not in any way an attack and the target won’t be expecting it), but the GM might consider giving the

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target a roll against its PS to understand that someone, or something, is probing its mind. Likewise, all the Psi-Judge will detect is the general personality and predominant thoughts of the target (this is not as precise as an interrogation situation). If there are potential multiple targets within range and the Psi-Judge cannot specifically nominate one, the GM may wish to rule that the Psi-Judge detects the nearest perp (although the Psi-Judge may be able to say, "I'm trying to get whoever's in that warehouse, apartment, etc." which will narrow the field down a bit). This PS-related Special Ability is the one which gives GMs and players most problems; hopefully GMs will find the suggestions here useful in designing their own supplementary rules for its use.

Detect Psyker

Since Psyker perps are fairly rare, the restriction on this ability that a Psi-Judge may only detect a Psyker actively using his powers on the same Combat Round seems rather mean. It might be worth extending. GMS might rule for example, that a Psi-Judge can detect the Psyker up to one Turn after the Psyker has been using some psi power, but with a -20% modifier; the Psyker leaves some 'psychic trace' which the Psi-Judge can pick up on. Thus a Psi-Judge arriving just after some psi ability has been in use can detect that fact; but if picking up a trace, the Psi-Judge will need a second roll against PS (again with a -20% modifier) to detect the strength of the Psyker's power. Also, if more than one Psyker has been active, the Psyker with the strongest PS might be ruled to be the one detected specifically, although the GM might rule that Psi-Judge may also detect that more than one Psyker has recently been active (or is active) within the Sector range for the ability.

Hold Door

As I understand this, the door will remain held in perpetuity if the Psi-Judge remains within the Sector and doesn't use one of the range of Special Abilities listed in the Judge's Book. This doesn't seem too likely. The GM may care to rule that, even if no other circumstances negate this effect, the holding effect will begin to dissipate after 20 Turns, with the maximum duration of the effect in Game Turns being (20 + PS score of the Psyker). Thus a Psi-Judge with a PS of 80 could maintain the holding effect for 100 turns, maximum duration. Sometimes such time limits could be important.

Illusions

The GM should take care to advise players that not only illusions which paralyze targets for two rounds can be created; illusionary objects objects can also be created. If an illusionary object can also be created a walkway across a gap of some kind (with a steep drop below) was created, then there is no reason why anyone viewing it would be transfixed for two rounds unable to do anything (of course no Psi-Judge would create an illusion like this but some nasty little Psyker might). Such illusions should also be subject to 'decay' effect like that suggested for Hold Door above.

Super-Telekinesis/Telekinesis

There appears to be something of an oversight in the rulebook; while the weight of objects you can move, how far they can be moved, and where they go is described, no range for the operation of the abilities is specified. I suggest that the range should be 1 metre per PS point for Telekinesis and 2 metres per PS point for Super-Telekinesis. Note that at the extreme limits of the applicable ranges, both the directions in which objects can move and how far they can go may be affected by the range limit for operation of the ability. GMs should feel free to test these optional rules additions and modifications for play balance and devise their own changes to suit their own campaigns. So, now for the suggested additional Special Ability, a blessing to all those Psi-Judges worrying over that feeble Strength score....

Metabolic Control

This new Special Ability involves normal control over internal physical forces in the body, just as telekinesis involves control over external forces. A Psyker with this ability can minimise such effects as bleeding, vomiting, swelling, shock, etc. contingent upon successful hits made upon him in combat. The ability is not exercised by voluntary effort; it operates as a mental reflex whenever a successful hit is made upon the Psyker. When the ability is operational, the effects of hits may be avoided; this chance is equal to one-hal the Psycho's PS. All such effects (Wounds, Stuns, Initiative Loss) may be so avoided. If the hit is severe enough to cause multiple effects (e.g., a Stub gun hit causing a Wound, Stuns and Initiative Loss), then more than one roll against PS will need to be made, starting with the most serious effect (ie, Wounds). Any PS roll failure along the line means the less serious effects will automatically affect the Psi-Judge. If two Wounds might be sustained from the hit, a roll against PS makes it a physical wound. Further, chest and abdomen wounds if sustained - can produce further wounds, but where such a second wound would normally develop, a roll against PS may be allowed to prevent the occurrence of that additional wound. However, since this ability influences immediate reflexes and the like, a Psi-Judge possessing it will not recover from sustained wounds and so on more rapidly than any other Judge when appropriate medical treatment is given.

Note that this Special Ability is a deeply engrained defensive reflex and it will operate even if the Psi-Judge has used some other Special Ability during that combat round. However, no PS-based Special Ability can be exercised for the remainder of the Combat Round during which the ability of Metabolic Control was used. Further, if Metabolic Control was required to avoid a Wound affecting the Psyker, then the psi power utilised is so great that no PS-based Special Ability (other than Metabolic Control itself) can be used for a further 3 Combat Rounds, and the Psyker's PS will drop by 2 points during that time, recovering to its normal limit at the rate of 2 points per round thereafter.

Note for GMs: To maintain game balance, it is advisable that two further rulings be introduced. First, this Special Ability is only available to those Psi-Judges with a PS of 50 or above. Thus only Psi-Judges can ever possess this Special Ability, never an ordinary Judge who has boosted his PS to the 40 limit. This ability is specifically designed for use by reasonable Judges! Second, Metabolic Control does not protect the Psi-Judge against the effects of Psychic Attack, since this is a mental attack and Metabolic Control is designed as a reflex protection against direct physical damage attacks.

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