

Table of Contents

Synthesys Design Manifesto.....	2
Overall Design.....	2
Stats.....	2
Strength.....	2
Advantages and Disadvantages.....	2
Skills.....	3
Combat.....	3
Equipment.....	3
Combat System.....	3
Hit Locations.....	3
On Campaign Settings.....	4

Copyright © 2003 by Jonathan W. Acheson

THIS WORK MAY NOT BE SOLD, DISTRIBUTED OR
REPUBLISHED ELECTRONICALLY OR IN ANY OTHER FORM
WITHOUT THE EXPRESS WRITTEN CONSENT OF THE
AUTHOR. IF YOU SEE THIS GUIDE BEING OFFERED FOR SALE,
PLEASE CONTACT ME (acheson@rcn.com).

Synthesys Design Manifesto

Overall Design

The overall design is that of a skill-based system that would be applicable to modern-day, science fiction and superhero gaming. The system should be general enough to be applied to most other settings as well, although no special stats are in place to govern magic, telepathy, etc.

Character creation should take less than an hour for most characters.

The system should be more deterministic than random – skill and stats should have more influence on results than random dice rolls.

There are two kinds of complexity you can add to a system. Good complexity comes from simple rules that interact with each other in interesting ways. Bad complexity is pages and pages of exceptions and errata that interfere with each other in poorly-defined ways.

Costs of skills and stats are fixed: there is not more than one way to buy skills or stats or powers. Two characters with the same stats and skills must always have the same point cost.

All characters can be heroes if the player so desires.

There should be balance between different character types.

Stats

I tend to avoid stats that are “must-haves” in order for characters to be functional.

There is no Willpower stat because 1) it only applies to a handful of skills like Ignore Pain, most of which are better handled as low-level superpowers anyway, and 2) because with it present it becomes mandatory to have a lot of Willpower in order to act properly heroic, or even to act at all. This undermines the “all characters are heroes” principle.

There is no Reflexes stat because if it is present in the system, all combat tends to revolve around being fast or being first. I wanted more options.

Right now there is a flat cost for stats: it does not get progressively more expensive to go from a 15 to a 16 or a 19 to a 20. This is because 1) it makes buying stats very cumbersome, and 2) it means you can give up points in one stat without being able to do anything positive in the stat you want to buy up and 3) in order to have a character who is exceptional in one area, they have to be drastically stunted in some other way, because gently trimming back other stats won't get you enough points to reach the pinnacle if there is a geometric increase in cost and 4)

it just doesn't seem like any fun to me. It won't prevent min-maxing (in fact, it really only provides a foothold for minmaxers to take advantage of), and it makes everyone else miserable.

Strength

Strength has three main areas of application:

- How much weight of gear a character can carry
- How heavy a weight can they shift or lift
- Extra damage in hand-to-hand combat

The last of these is by far the trickiest. You want the big strong characters to get bonuses to hit, but you don't want the bonuses to become so great at the upper end that they overshadow the normal characters. If 5d6 is normal sword damage, you want the biggest and strongest to be able to do, at most, 10d6.

Another tricky bit is that you want the amount of bonus damage for a particular weapon to be scaled up and down to fit the weapon. For Twenty-guy, getting an extra 5d6 of damage on a sword swing still seems reasonable, because they're huge and scary strong. But it's not reasonable that they get 5d6 extra damage on a dagger hit, which might be only a 2d6 normally.

Advantages and Disadvantages

I don't have Disadvantages. This is because players will always take the maximum allowable number of disads if they're available, because after all you're rewarding them for it. This has several negative side effects:

1. All characters wind up being flawed. Playing a character without disads is not practical, because they wind up with far fewer points than the rest of the party has.
2. Most flaws end up being obnoxious instead of dramatic. Again, this follows from the system of rewards that disads set up: players max out their disads in ways that won't limit them too much.
3. Characters which are truly deserving of the extra points for their disads aren't rewarded anyway, because everyone else has the max amount of disads too. The system doesn't even do what it was supposed to do.
4. Advantages and disadvantages always produce pages and pages of exceptions and errata which the players and GM have to deal with. This is the clunky, bad kind of complexity.

5. IMHO, the penalty of the disads tends to be shared by the entire party, while the rewards go first and foremost to the individual player. This encourages abuse of the game system.

If a character wants to have a disad built into their character concept, fine. They don't get any points for it, though. In return, I'll try not to nickel-and-dime them every time they try to tie their shoelaces with that hook for a hand (or whatever).

Alternatively, if a GM really wants to reward someone for playing a character with flaws or limitations, they can just give them some extra points under the table. They should weigh it against how much of a burden this character will be on the rest of the party, though.

Skills

Skills are another area in which complexity can be a problem.

Basically, you want to balance the amount of detail present in your skills against the problem of requiring characters to buy too many skills. Also, you want to make sure that some common types of characters don't need to buy far more skills than other common types of characters.

For instance, it's easy to come up with dozens of combat-related skills, but if thieves only have to buy half as many skills to get their jobs done, they will be much more powerful than the fighters whose points are spread out among dozens of skills.

“Training”

Some systems give the PCs a break on learning skills provided they studied in a training environment or under a teacher. I'm against it on two counts:

1. It violates the simplicity of “this is what your character has, this is what it costs.” Simplicity rules.
2. It's really not realistic. Yes, one could expect to learn *theory* faster in a classroom than on the job. However, classroom instruction doesn't teach you how things are actually done in the field: only work experience does that. One could have a system where you could learn faster in a classroom, but would have penalties in the field due to lack of practical experience which you could eventually buy off, but that seems like a very complicated way of getting back to the point of not using a “training” system at all.

If you really want to have “training” give extra skills, just give the players extra XP for the time they spend training.

Equipment

You should avoid the “Traveller Problem” of all of your characters with the best gear being unstoppable. There should be tradeoffs for having so much gear. I propose making them have to deal with maintenance issues.

Having lots of expensive gear makes you Cost of Living go way up. In turn, this makes you either spend all of your time on maintenance, or have to buy Wealth in order to afford what you already have.

Combat System

Combat must move quickly. A combat between a party of 5 PCs and a group of similar size should be resolved within an hour.

While it should be possible for a character to be killed, it should be much more likely that they be taken out of combat by injury, unless artillery is used.

Hit Locations

What it needs to do:

Work with all forms of combat: fistfights to medieval melee to powered armor to vehicle and starship combat.

Avoid the effect where you take the normal number of hit points and just split them up into the various locations, because that makes the characters too frail.

Grazing Shots if you barely make it, killer shots if you make it by a lot.

Definitely go up above 100! If I get to add the amount I made my roll by to hit location, I might even go above 200, if I have a 125 skill!

Instead of having to calculate hit points for 20 different hit locations, stick with head, chest, abdomen, arms, legs & gear. An eye shot then becomes 2x damage to the head, while grazing shots are -2 die damage and decreased Penetration.

Work equally well with shots from the side & back

For Secondary/Primary arm, leg, eye, whatever, make odd=Secondary, even=Primary. That way, if the person was behind cover (looking around a corner), you can just say they got hit on the side that was exposed.

Handle cover somewhat gracefully, or have a workaround

Include helpful but annoying things like “your PalmPilot takes a bullet for you.”

“Disfigured is better than dead”?

Fistfights are tricky: you want most of the blows to land on the body and face, areas which should be de-emphasized in melee. Whoever heard of getting leg injuries in a fistfight?

Allow called shots? But make "called shot to the head" kind of hard?

get tired of it because either their characters are invulnerable, or they're always injured and dying. You don't tend to get campaigns in this kind of setting.

The problem is, the needs of a gaming setting are different from the needs of a fictional setting. A lot of stuff works in fiction that does not work in gaming.

On Campaign Settings

WHY GAMERS SUCK

by Gareth-Michael Skarka

Wednesday, July 11, 2001

Why, though? Why the over-reliance upon the tropes of medieval fantasy? Good question. Is it the market dominance of D&D that makes gamers expect and demand fantasy in their games? Or is it that expectation that helps maintain the market dominance of D&D? No matter what the answer, the result is the same: great games either don't get made, or don't sell, because they aren't "fantasy" enough. Which is too bad...eating macaroni and cheese every day can kill your taste buds for other dishes.

The thing about D&D is that it covers the prerequisites for most people's gaming tastes. There are ample opportunities for combat and adventure. There is easily available fast healing to remove the consequences of combat and adventure. There is a setting that is well-known, but vague and flexible enough that you don't have to take a history or anthropology class to play it (RuneQuest). There is a clearly-defined system of character advancement, and characters advance fast enough to give a feeling of accomplishment. There are built-in team dynamics that let people fill a variety of roles (not just "fighter") and a number of clearly defined and balanced archetypes. Character creation is fast enough to get in some roleplaying on the first session.

A lot of the backgrounds and systems listed fail on one or more of these criteria.

Sure, you can base a game on Saving Private Ryan. Good luck getting your lady friends to play it. Why? Because all the characters are going to be foot soldiers, and, while this is a generalization, most female gamers don't want to play male infantrymen. And, if your characters get injured, they're most likely going to stay injured, because there's no healing. And there probably won't be much to do outside of combat.

NYPD Blue? What if you don't want to play a cop? Gladiator? What if you don't want to play a gladiator? If you play some other type of character, how will you still be part of the group?

Most of the "great" settings listed are no-healing, all-fighting, which turns away the people who don't want to play fighters, and the fighters