Bullet Points

Characters and Class Abilities
by Charles Ryan

Welcome to the seventh installment of *Bullet Points.* I'm Charles Ryan, one of the designers of the ***d20 Modern** Roleplaying Game.* I'm here to answer your questions about the game, offer advice on tricky issues, and give you a little peek into the minds of the designers. You'll be hearing from me every couple of weeks.

If you've checked out the earlier installments of *Bullet Points,* you know the format. Every two weeks I pick an issue that's provoked a lot of questions or comments, begin with a general discussion of the topic, and then answer specific questions related to it. If there are any unrelated but pressing questions in my mailbox, I might tackle them at the end of the column, but only if there's room and they can't wait for an appropriately themed column.

d20 Modern Class System

This installment focuses on characters and class abilities. I'll start off with a little discussion of the design philosophy behind the basic and advanced class system used in the ***d20 Modern** Roleplaying Game*.

The Design Process

When we sat down to formulate the basics of the game, we immediately realized that everyone has a different idea of what a "modern" setting is. Some of us envisioned espionage games, while others were inspired by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *X-Files*, Tom Clancy novels, or even CNN. Even science fiction movies such as *Aliens* and *Blade Runner* and comic books such as *Appleseed* came up in early design meetings. And lead designer Bill Slavicsek had been mulling over the ideas behind the *Urban Arcana* setting for years.

We wanted a game that would serve each of these genres -- as well as any others that GMs might come up with on their own -- equally well. But when we started brainstorming character classes to cover all the bases, the core class list quickly ballooned to twenty or thirty. Not only did we have way too many core classes, but only a handful of them would be appropriate for any given setting.

Out of that realization came a new idea: Why did we have to base a character's class on career anyway? What if the core classes built upon the fundamental strengths of a character's abilities instead? What if they gave the hero generalized abilities that could be applied to any adventuring career -- be it fighting alien invaders or tracking down rogue psionic operatives? The idea caught on, especially when we contemplated adding occupations as a separate game mechanic, so that a starting character could tailor his class to reflect his training or background.

It was only a small leap from this concept to the idea of linking the core classes to the game's six ability scores. But a game with only six generic classes seemed pretty flavorless. So we went back to our original list of class ideas and boiled them down to create twenty advanced classes (the eighteen that appear in the ***d20 Modern**game, plus two more for the Genetech campaign setting, which unfortunately had to be cut

from the book for space reasons).

Although the advanced classes are clearly more career-oriented than the basic ones, and they can't be taken until characters reach at least 4th level, we wanted to ensure that the basic classes weren't seen as being weaker than the advanced classes. We worked hard to ensure that the talents available to the basic classes would be useful and appealing to characters at all levels. Since there's no penalty for multiclassing in the **d20 Modern**game, we wanted players to feel that gaining additional levels in the basic classes was always a useful option, even at high levels. We also didn't want to put too much strain on GMs. Not every GM has time to build complicated multiclassed characters, so we wanted to ensure that a 10th-level Fast Hero wasn't noticeably weaker than a Fast Hero 3/Gunslinger 7.

Too Generic?

Some players have expressed doubt about the generic nature of the basic classes, but their very flexibility makes **d20 Modern** a great game to use with almost any setting. My own campaign is set in a post-apocalyptic world, and I've also run *Call of Cthulhu* adventures using the **d20 Modern** classes. (This tactic allows the creation of characters who are "ordinary" but not quite as -- well, hapless -- as conventional *Call of Cthulhu* characters). Some GMs even use the **d20 Modern** system for fantasy games when they want to create a lower-fantasy atmosphere than regular **D&D** offers. Still not convinced that the basic classes aren't bland? Wait till you see them flex their muscles in the **d20 Modern**Future supplement (due out in 2004).

Choosing Basic Classes

Here's an interesting tidbit that some players tend to overlook: You don't have to match your character's basic class to her best ability score. It's true that some talents are based on the bonus for the ability score associated with the class -- the Dedicated hero's cool under pressure talent, for example, is pretty worthless for a character with a low Wisdom modifier. But that often isn't the case. In my own campaign, Eric Cagle plays a Strong hero whose Dexterity score is much higher than his Strength score. But he's used the Strong hero's talents to complement the character's other abilities quite effectively.

Questions and Answers

Okay, enough about how character classes were designed. Let's look at some questions about class abilities and talents, then go on to a few other character-related questions.

What's the difference between the Investigator's discern lies ability and the normal use of the Sense Motive skill?

The Sense Motive skill can be used for two purposes: to overcome a bluff, and to get a sense of a GM character's trustworthiness. Understanding the difference between this skill and the discern lie class feature begins with understanding the difference between a bluff and a lie.

A lie is a simple misrepresentation of the facts. For example, if a suspect tells you she was in Chicago on the day of the crime, when in fact she wasn't, that's a lie. If a client tells you she'll pay $10,000 for the job when she really intends to stiff you, that's a lie too. Body language and attitude are part of such communication, but not necessarily the major part. A lie may be very sophisticated and well thought-out,

and it is intended to deceive someone at least until evidence to the contrary is discovered.

A bluff, on the other hand, is a quick prevarication intended to distract, confuse, or mislead someone -- generally only for the short term. It is intended to momentarily deter an action or decision, not to withstand long-term or careful scrutiny. You bluff your way past a security guard by flashing your video club card as though it were a press pass and acting like you know what you're doing. You bluff your way out of a brawl by acting like you're tougher than the 250-pound biker who's challenging you. Bluffs depend almost completely on attitude and body language. They may or may not involve actual lies, but if they do, those lies usually aren't very sophisticated and aren't intended to deceive the target for more than a few moments.

The first usage of the Sense Motive skill mentioned above allows you to see through a bluff with a successful check, but it doesn't help you determine whether any given statement is a lie. From a purely mechanical standpoint, an NPC should not have to make a Bluff check every time she utters a lie. And if no Bluff check is required, there's nothing for the Sense Motive check to oppose.

The second function of the Sense Motive skill is to determine the general trustworthiness of a character. When the skill is used this way, a successful check might reveal that your suspect is highly -- well -- suspicious, and that she might tend to lie to you. But that doesn't tell you which, if any, of her statements are actually untrue. In fact, an NPC can be highly untrustworthy even if she doesn't happen to be telling any lies at the moment. Again from a mechanical standpoint, this usage of Sense Motive requires a whole minute to use, so it can't be applied to a single statement.

The discern lies class feature, on the other hand, is specifically designed to determine the truth of an individual statement.

If my Dedicated hero's Wisdom bonus increases, do I get to pick an additional skill for his cool under pressure ability?

If your character gains a permanent Wisdom increase, his new Wisdom bonus applies to the cool under pressure ability. So if his bonus permanently rises from +3 to +4, you get to pick another skill on which he can take 10. But If your character's Wisdom bonus increases only temporarily (via the *enhance ability* spell, for example), you do not get to pick additional skills for the cool under pressure ability.

The Strong hero's ignore hardness talent is just like the melee smash talent, only more restricted. Is that right?

Actually, there are a few typos in the ignore hardness talent tree. The text should read as follows.

Ignore Hardness: The Strong hero ignores 2 points of an object's hardness.

Improved Ignore Hardness: The Strong hero ignores 2 additional points of an object's hardness (for a total of 4).

Prerequisite: Ignore hardness.

Advanced Ignore Hardness: The Strong hero ignores 2 additional points of an object's hardness (for a

total of 6).

Prerequisites: Ignore hardness, improved ignore hardness.

The Strong hero's extreme effort talent requires a full-round action, after which its bonus applies to any Strength check or Strength-based skill check. Does this mean that if I take a full-round action, I can apply this bonus to a trip attempt, since trip is essentially an opposed Strength check? How does this work with attacks of opportunity?

You can use extreme effort for opposed Strength checks, including those that are part of combat maneuvers. However, the Strength check is a full-round action for you, so you can't do anything else that round. For example, you can use extreme effort for the opposed Strength check required for make a bull rush, but only if you start adjacent to the opponent -- you can't charge the target because doing so wouldn't allow you to use a full-round action for the check. Also, you could push the target back only 5 feet because you're allowed only a 5-foot step yourself after taking a full-round action to make the Strength check.

Effectively, this restriction means you can use extreme effort for trip and 5-foot bull rush attempts, but not for any other special attack actions. All the rest require additional actions as well as opposed Strength checks, so using extreme effort in conjunction with them is impossible.

Extreme effort has no effect on attacks of opportunity. You provoke attacks of opportunity normally when using this talent.

After a Negotiator uses the talk down ability, the target is "indifferent to the Negotiator and the situation in general." Can the Negotiator immediately use Diplomacy to change the target's attitude to helpful? Can she use the sow distrust ability to make the target hostile to someone else?

Once the talk down ability has been used and the target is indifferent, the Negotiator (or anyone else) can go on to use any skill or class feature desired (including Diplomacy and the sow distrust ability) to alter the target's behavior. Of course, such attempts must happen on later rounds, since the talk down ability uses a full-round action.

In what circumstances can you use the Negotiator's talk down ability? Can you use it on any unfriendly or hostile character?

Sure! You can use it in any circumstances that allow you to talk to your target.

What happens if my character advances beyond 20th level? Are there any rules for epic-level *d20 Modern* characters?

We don't have any rules for characters above 20th level yet, though we may publish some in the future. In the meantime, you probably won't go too far wrong if you simply keep advancing the character normally, giving it the same benefits that each additional class level would otherwise bestow. Alternatively, if you'd like to borrow a few elements from the **D&D** *Epic Level Handbook*, they'd probably work just fine too.

Are advanced classes the same as prestige classes, or will we see prestige classes for the *d20 Modern* game in future products?

Advanced classes aren't the same as prestige classes, and you will see some of the latter in future products. In fact, you'll see the first prestige classes for the **d20 Modern** game in *Urban Arcana,* which should be coming out about the time this column is posted to the web.

Do you have a rules question about the **d20 Modern** *Roleplaying Game?*
Send it to bulletpoints@wizards.com , and then check back here every other week for the latest batch of answers!

About the Author

Charles Ryan has been designing and editing games for more than twelve years. His credits include such diverse titles as the **d20 Modern** *Roleplaying Game,The Wheel of Time Roleplaying Game, Deadlands*, *Millennium's End*, *The Last Crusade*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Dune: Chronicles of the Imperium*, and *Star Trek: Red Alert!*, to name just a few. Charles served as Chairman of the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts & Design, the professional organization of the games industry, from 1996 through 2001. He lives in Kent, Washington with his lovely wife Tammie, three cats, and a dog. He works for Wizards of the Coast, Inc.