Notes from the Bunker
Cool under Fire
by Rich Redman

Welcome to my bunker. As one of the designers of the **d20 Modern** *Roleplaying Game,* and a veteran of real-world modern combat (having served as a tank platoon leader in Operation: Desert Storm), I'm in a unique position to offer insights into the game.

This month's topic is the development and use of variant rules -- specifically in this case, a rule that determines whether a hero can stay cool under fire. While we're developing this rule, we'll consider the generalities of variant rules -- when one might be useful, how to develop a sound one, and how to implement it. When we're finished, we'll have a nifty new rule to use as well as the know-how to make others.

What's the Rule for?

First, define what you want your new rule to cover. In this case, we want a rule that determines whether a hero can stay cool under fire. Why? Well, the truth is that in a critical situation, people usually react without thinking. Those who have received specific training related to the situation often follow that training, acting more or less on automatic. Doing so provides a sort of mental refuge when events occur that are beyond the human capacity to comprehend. People without training generally freeze and do nothing. Sometimes, though, the roles reverse -- people with no training take charge, while people who know what to do cry, scream, tremble, and generally fail to act in a constructive manner. We can describe people capable of acting constructively in a crisis as "cool under fire."

Why Measure It?

Most of us have seen game situations like the following.

Player 1: Biff Hardslab steps around the corner.

GM: Okay, Biff sees two guards -- one with a shotgun and one with an assault rifle. Roll for initiative.

Player 1: What kind of shotgun? What kind of assault rifle?

Player 2: What difference does it make? You're getting us shot up! Again!

Player 1: Because Biff would know how many shots they have and. . . .

GM: Biff doesn't have time for that now. Roll for initiative!

Player 1: I still think Biff would know. Biff gets . . . a 7.

> *GM:* The guards go first. The guard with the shotgun runs away.
>
> *Player 1:* Of course he does! Everyone fears Biff Hardslab!
>
> *GM:* Biff's reputation bonus is +0. These guys have no idea who he is. The guard with the assault rifle takes a 5-foot step back and fires a burst at Biff. He hits . . . and does 16 points of damage.
>
> *Player 1:* Ha! That's not even enough to make Biff save against massive damage. Biff pulls his .45 and shoots the guy twice.
>
> *Player 2:* But that's, like, half your hit points! Don't you want to take cover?
>
> *Player 1:* Biff Hardslab never takes cover!

The truth is that combat is overwhelming, and no one reacts the same way twice to being in a combat situation. Measuring coolness under fire gives the GM a tool with which to introduce a bit of reality to the game. If used properly, this tool can enforce good roleplaying by reining in attitudes like that of Biff's player. It can also change preconceived notions about which characters make good combatants.

Possible Foundations

The **d20 Modern** *Roleplaying Game* gives the GM several tools with which to assemble rules variants. The trick is picking those that are appropriate. In this case, for instance, we could link our "cool under fire" check to any of several abilities or traits.

If we think that "cool under fire" is based on force of personality, we could use Charisma as the basis for a check. If we define it as a function of perception or belief, we could use Wisdom. If it's related to a character's toughness or his ability to withstand pain, we could use Constitution. We could even make it a skill or create a feat for it, but such a mechanic seems more complicated than necessary. We could even adapt the Sanity rules from the **d20 Call of Cthulhu** game, but that option requires a lot of support information. Besides, we want our system focused on the immediate effects of losing your cool, not on ongoing psychoses.

Another factor to consider is level. It seems eminently reasonable that higher-level heroes should worry less about staying cool under fire than lower-level ones. Maybe that means our mechanic should involve a saving throw. After all, one of the defining differences between an ability check and a saving throw is that saving throws automatically take a hero's level into account.

But which saving throw is appropriate? A quick check on the way the game defines saving throws (page 133) makes it clear that Will is the best choice, partly because this variant measures an aspect of *mental* toughness, and partly because the chaos of combat could be considered a form of mental influence. Besides, neither of the other two saving throws really fit. By using the hero's Will save bonus as the basis for the "cool check," we can ensure that his Wisdom modifier, class and level, and modifiers from Iron Will and other game mechanics that affect mental toughness all apply.

Modifiers to Cool Checks

Unfortunately, a Will save won't do the trick by itself. Any system based solely on a Will save would leave most of the classes we think of as "good in combat" devastated. The Strong hero, the Fast hero, the Tough hero, and even the Soldier would suffer under such an arrangement. We could allow heroes to use their class levels, or some part of them, as a modifier on the saving throw, but that arrangement would let them benefit from level twice -- once from the Will saving throw bonus itself and once from the modifier. A better modifier might be one based on the hero's starting occupation, since some professions provide better training in how to handle life-or-death situations than others. The table below gives modifiers based on starting occupations.

Cool Check Modifiers from Starting Occupations

Occupation	Modifier
Academic	-2
Adventurer	+1
Athlete	+1
Blue Collar	+1
Celebrity	-2
Creative	-2
Criminal	+2
Dilettante	-2
Doctor	+2
Emergency Services	+2
Entrepreneur	+1
Investigative	+1
Law Enforcement	+3
Military	+3
Religious	+1
Rural	+0
Student	-2
Technician	+0
White Collar	-1

Other Modifiers to Cool Checks

Now, how do we model the fact that the same person rarely reacts the same way twice? We can apply a situational modifier to the cool check as well. The table below gives the modifiers that might apply in various situations.

Cool Check Modifiers from Events and Conditions

Event or Condition	Modifier
Each round of combat after the first (cumulative)	-1
Taking damage since your last action	...
...1-5 points	-1
...6-10 points	-2

...Enough to force a massive damage check	-3
Opponents used explosives since your last action	-2
Opponents used fire (white phosphorous, flame thrower, etc.) since your last action	-2
Opponents outnumber heroes	-1
Opponents have automatic weapons and heroes don't	-1
One or more opponents acted in the surprise round	-1
Each ally rendered unconscious, disabled, or dying since your last action	-2
Each ally panickedor cowering since your last action	-1
Each ally pinned since your last action	-1
A successful Intimidate check against you	-1
Heroes outnumber opponents	+1
Heroes have automatic weapons and opponent's don't	+1
One or more heroes acted on the surprise round	+1
Each opponent rendered unconscious, disabled, or dying since your last action	+2
Each opponent panickedor cowering since your last action	+1
Each opponent pinned since your last action	+1

Because of the first entry on this table (the cumulative penalty for each round of combat after the first), everyone will eventually fail a cool check. That's pretty realistic.

Cool Checks

This rules variant requires each combatant to make a "cool check" at the beginning of her action in each round of combat. It can also be used in situations that don't involve any actual combat. Any time a GM decides that a life-or-death situation requires characters to act in initiative order, cool checks are appropriate. The system should apply to GM characters as well as to heroes, since they too can suffer the effects of losing their cool.

Making Cool Checks

To make a cool check, roll 1d20 and add your hero's total Will saving throw bonus and the modifiers for his starting occupation and the situation (see tables above). The DC for a cool check is always 15. Characters cannot take 10 or 20 on cool checks -- if they could, the situation wouldn't be tense enough to merit one in the first place. A hero may spend action points on a cool check, and the usual rules for spending action points apply.

Succeeding on Cool Checks

Any hero who succeeds on a cool check can act normally for that round of combat. Additional benefits apply for success by a significant margin. The following benefits seem appropriate.

Success by a margin of 5 to 10 grants the hero a +2 morale bonus on attack rolls, saving throws, skill checks, and cool checks until her next action.

Success by a margin of 10 or more grants her the same morale bonus as above and also grants the same bonus to each of her allies within 30 feet. This bonus lasts until the successful hero's next action.

As noted above, however, the hero must make a new cool check every round, and the cumulative penalty for each successive round ensures that she will fail eventually if the combat continues long enough. The consequences for failure warrant caution even from those who succeed in keeping their cool.

Failing Cool Checks

The consequences of failing a cool check depend on how badly the character fails. See the Character Condition Summary in Chapter Five: Combat of the **d20 Modern** *Roleplaying Game* for explanations of the conditions mentioned below.

Failure by a margin of 5 or less means the hero is stunned for 1 round.

Failure by a margin of 5 to 10 means the character is shaken, and the -2 penalty for that condition applies to subsequent cool checks as well. Such a character remains shaken until he succeeds at a cool check (see Succeeding at Cool Checks, above), fails a cool check by 10 or more (see below), or the encounter ends.

Failure by a margin of 10 or more means the character is panicked. If he can move far enough in a single round to be out of sight of the combat, he flees. Otherwise, he moves behind the nearest source of total cover (GM's decision) and cowers. The character continues to make cool checks every round but suffers no consequences for additional failures.

Recovering your Cool

At the end of combat, every surviving and conscious character makes a final cool check. Those who succeed can act normally; those who fail become fatigued. (See the Character Condition Summary in Chapter Five: Combat of the **d20 Modern** *Roleplaying Game* for an explanation of thiscondition.)

Implementing a Rules Variant

Rules variants can be fun, but they can also introduce needless complexity or interact with the game system in ways you didn't expect. Before implementing a rules variant, consider the following issues.

- **Why am I using this?** The "cool under fire" variant gives you a way to model realistic reactions to critical situations. If your players already roleplay freaking out occasionally, or if you're running a campaign in which all the heroes are characters from action movies, this variant is neither necessary nor appropriate.
- **Am I clear on how the new rule really works?** When you're considering a rules variant, it's important to understand not only its mechanics, but also how it may affect play. Since this variant calls for several additional checks for every character involved in a conflict, it will certainly slow the process of resolving combat.
- **Have I considered why this rule wasn't included in the game to begin with?** Cool checks aren't appropriate for every **d20 Modern**campaign. In some cases, because of strong roleplaying, they're not necessary.
- **How will the new rule impact other rules or situations?** Cool checks can make combat much more lethal if heroes freeze in the open, so you'll need to give your players time to get used to their

effects. You might want to let them "take back" heroes' actions for a session or two, until they become accustomed to the consequences.

- **Does the change favor one class, race, skill, feat, or the like more than others?** This variant favors some starting occupations and classes with average or good Will saving throw progressions.
- **Overall, is this change going to make more players happy or unhappy?** If all your players have heroes like Biff Hardslab, chances are you're going to make everyone unhappy by implementing cool checks. On the other hand, if all the heroes except one are reasonable and realistic, the majority of your players might appreciate a means of reining in the unrealistic one.

Most importantly, remember to discuss variants and rules changes with your players before you decide to implement them. They're part of your campaign too, and they deserve some say about proposed rules alterations.

About the Author

Before [Rich Redman](#) came to the RPG R&D department at Wizards of the Coast, Inc., he had been an Army officer, a door-to-door salesman, the manager of a computer store, a fundraiser for a veterans' assistance group, and the manager of Wizards of the Coast, Inc.'s Customer Service department. Rich is a prolific game designer who has worked on the **Dungeons & Dragons** game, the *d20 Modern* Roleplaying Game, the *Marvel Super Heroes* Adventure Game, and **Dark*Matter**. When he's not working as vice president of [The Game Mechanics](#), a d20 design studio, Rich does freelance game design, cooks, and practices yoga, tai chi, and silat.