



## Bullet Points

# Character Concept and Classes

By Owen K.C. Stephens

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Welcome to the latest installment of *Bullet Points*. I'm Owen K.C. Stephens, writer of a lot of **Star Wars Roleplaying Game** material and a contributor to the recently announced *d20 Cyberscape* book, as well as some **d20 Modern** projects as yet unannounced. It's my job to answer your questions about the game, offer advice on tricky rules issues, and give you a little peek into the design philosophy of the game.

Every two weeks I pick an issue that's provoked a lot of questions or comments, begin with a general discussion of the topic where applicable, and then answer specific questions related to it. If the mailbox contains any unrelated but pressing questions, I might tackle them at the end of the column, but only if I have room and they can't wait for an appropriately themed column.

## Character Concept and Classes

Rather than address a series of specific questions in this installment, I want to talk about a set of related ideas touched upon in a number of recent questions. In particular, I've received numerous questions about creating specific starting occupations to represent unusual backgrounds, using advanced and prestige classes specific to one **d20 Modern** setting in others, what to do after completing an advanced class, whether various advanced classes can be used to describe a broad range of character types, and how to build various popular heroic archetypes using the rules as written. In short, players and GMs want to know what occupations, classes, and backgrounds they can use to create their specific character concepts.

## Character Concept

A character concept is just as important as class or starting occupation, but it has no separate identity in terms of game mechanics. At its simplest, a character concept may be exactly the same as the character's starting occupation and classes. A Strong hero with the military starting occupation and the Soldier advanced class is obviously a dedicated soldier trained by some military group. Keeping a character concept this simple is perfectly fine, and a lot of people prefer not to put any additional thought into their characters. Since the focus of the **d20 Modern** game is action, knowing that a character is a Soldier is enough -- it doesn't really matter whether he was an Army grunt, a Navy SEAL, a paratrooper, or a Marine tank commander.

However, a player who does want to go into more detail should remember that the names of the starting occupations and classes are guidelines and descriptors, not hard rules about how the classes can be used. So if you have a character concept for an extreme sports star and you believe the Daredevil advanced class is a good match for it, don't give up on the idea just because the class description doesn't specifically mention extreme sports players.

Similarly, just because your character takes a few levels of Smart hero doesn't automatically mean that casual observers think of him as smart. In fact, it can be very useful to take a few levels of a basic class that shores up a character's apparent weaknesses. So an overweight, middle-aged, glasses-wearing character might decide to take a level or two of Fast hero to help overcome his natural slowness -- but people won't necessarily think of

him as an agile acrobat just because he has done so.

Even so, you may find that no class is a good match for the particular character concept you have in mind. If you want to play a military doctor, a construction worker, a novelist, or a retired car mechanic, you just aren't going to find any one class that does a good job of describing that character -- even if you take some liberties with class names and the definitions of class abilities. For concepts such as these, you have to build the character carefully by choosing appropriate skills and feats -- and possibly even combining multiple classes. More about that technique in a moment.

### Ask the GM First, Not Last

For a variety of reasons, it's a good idea to run this kind of character concept past the GM before you do a lot of work on it. First of all, a concept that is difficult to build may not be appropriate for the GM's campaign. Playing a novelist is all well and good, but unless it's a crusading, investigative novelist, the character may have little reason to get involved in adventures and not much to offer a group even if she does. So be sure to outline what you see the character doing during an adventure in clear terms for the GM. A novelist who's looking for a hundred hours of peace and quiet that she can spend at her typewriter is different from one who cranks out articles about modern mercenaries and compares the performance of various firearms. So let your GM know what you have in mind.

Second, the GM is more likely to allow an unusual combination of classes and feats if he knows in advance why you want them. A player who wants to take levels in the Soldier and Field Medic advanced classes may seem to be trying to min/max a character's effectiveness, but the combination makes more sense if the GM knows the character is supposed to be a Navy corpsman. In the same vein, the GM may be aware of an advanced class or feat that matches the concept well but isn't in any books used in the campaign. For example, in a globetrotting campaign focused on modern investigation and intrigue, you might want to play a diplomat who keeps an eye on the other characters for an international government organization. So while the GM isn't allowing the use of the *d20 Future* supplement for the most part, he might decide that the Ambassador advanced class matches the character concept and is acceptable in the game.

### What to Allow

When considering material from other books for use in his campaign, a GM must think about numerous factors. First and foremost, does the new material feel like it belongs in the game? For example, suppose the GM has envisioned a campaign similar to *Shadow Chasers*, but set just a bit in the future. The theme of the campaign is that extraordinary human heroes battle evil forces that most people don't believe exist. Magic is real, but dangerous. Many players would immediately want permission to use material from the ***Urban Arcana Campaign Setting*** -- including the Mage advanced class and the drow race -- in such a campaign. But the GM resists because such concepts don't match his idea of human heroes shunning magic as too dangerous to trust. He is, however, willing to allow classes such as the Archaic Weaponmaster, the Shadow Hunter, and the Swashbuckler, since they match the feel of the campaign.

The next question the GM should ask is whether a class grants powers that no other character can get. For example, in the near-future *Shadow Chasers* campaign mentioned above, the GMs limits the players to abilities that can be duplicated with skills or technology. Thus if a new player wanted to make a psychic character using the Battle Mind advanced class, the GM would have to consider the request carefully. Even though it doesn't use magic, the Battle Mind advanced class does give the character access to powers that no one else can match. That aspect of the class may not be unbalancing, but it's likely to breed resentment among the other players -- especially if they didn't know that the use of psionics was an option.

On the other hand, if a player wants to use the Helix Warrior advanced class from the *d20 Future* supplement to create an expert martial artist trained to perfect her body, he's exploring a concept much closer to what's already been allowed. The only really unusual power the Helix Warrior gains is darkvision, and that can be duplicated with technology in one form or another. The GM is still well within his rights to refuse in this case, but the Helix Warrior is less likely to create an imbalance or generate hard feelings among other players than the Battle Mind.

## Piecing Together a Character Concept

When you find that no allowed class matches your character concept very well, step back and consider what a judicious selection of skills and feats -- or even multiclassing -- can do for you. This method also works well when you've exhausted all the levels available in an advanced class and don't know where to go next.

To use this method, consider what kinds of abilities you want for your character, then try to match that list in any way you can. For example, a player with a simple military character who's already taken three levels of Strong hero and ten levels of Soldier may not know what to do next. No prestige class matches his concept very well, and he's already filled out his best advanced class. So before proceeding, the player needs to think about where the character should go from here.

If he wants to focus on melee combat and his soldier is a skilled commando, it may be best to take more levels of Strong hero -- or even a few levels in the Martial Artist advanced class, if he can meet the prerequisites. If the player would rather focus on firearms, the Fast hero and Gunslinger seem like natural choices. If the military hero has become a calmer, more thoughtful person during the course of adventures, it might be time to take levels of Dedicated hero, and if he's shown leadership qualities, Charismatic hero could be a good match.

In the same manner, when building an unusual character concept from scratch, begin by looking for good matches for abilities you'd like the character to have. Imagine a player making a hero for an **Urban Arcana** campaign. He wants to build a garbage collector who has seen numerous strange and terrible creatures in the wee hours of the morning while collecting refuse from the alleys of a large city. No basic or advanced class comes even remotely close to this concept, so the player has to consider how she envisions the hero acting during a game. After giving the matter some thought, she decides that she sees the garbage man fighting carrion crawlers with weapons of opportunity that he finds in the refuse and toughing it out when injured, since he can't tell anyone about his experiences without being labeled a drunk.

The Street Warrior advanced class from the *Urban Arcana Campaign Setting* has an improvised weapons special ability, and it also offers abilities such as urban survival and street cred. Though the class description portrays the character as a gang member, or perhaps a member of a vigilance community, the prerequisites and class abilities are a good match for the player's garbage man concept. If the garbage man is loyal to the community in which he works, or even to the sanitation department, he can even meet the allegiance requirement. The fastest path to Street Warrior is via Strong hero, but since the player wants his garbage man to be tougher than that, he decides to go with Tough hero and put off picking up Street Warrior for a level or two. He can look for a starting occupation that grants Streetfighting and Brawl as bonus feats, such as adventurer, athlete, investigative, or rural. Alternatively, he can use regular feat slots to take the feats and choose a starting occupation that's a better fit for his background, such as blue collar.

## Summary

Using the rules already in print for the **d20 Modern** game, players can create a wide range of character types

without trying to build an advanced class for every background, occupation, personality, or hobby. By looking for a good match in abilities and prerequisites, and explaining the character concept (including what the character will add to the campaign) to the GM, a player should be able to make a fun and interesting character to fit just about any idea without too much effort or frustration.

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Do you have a rules question about the d20 Modern Roleplaying Game? Send it to [bulletpoints@wizards.com](mailto:bulletpoints@wizards.com). For the quickest possible answer, please put the topic of your question in the subject line and keep the question as succinct as possible. If you have more than one question, feel free to send two or more emails -- but for best results please include only one question per email unless your questions are very closely related to one another. Please don't expect a direct answer by email. Check back here every other week for the latest batch of answers!

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## About the Author

Owen Kirker Clifford Stephens was born in 1970 in Norman, Oklahoma. He attended the TSR Writer's Workshop held at the Wizards of the Coast Game Center in 1997 and moved to the Seattle area in 2000, after accepting a job as a Game Designer at Wizards of the Coast, Inc. Fourteen months later, he returned to Oklahoma with his wife and three cats to pick up his freelance writer/developer career. He has author and co-author credits on numerous **Star Wars** and *EverQuest* projects, as well as *Bastards and Bloodlines* from Green Ronin. He also has producer credits for various IDA products, including the Stand-Ins printable figures.

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