Bullet Points
Nonlethal Combat
by Charles Ryan

Welcome to the third 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.

Nonlethal Combat

The topic for this installment is one of **d20 Modern**'s most controversial mechanics: nonlethal combat. As you undoubtedly know, the **d20 Modern** game uses a system for nonlethal damage that's somewhat different from the **D&D** game's subdual damage system. The **d20 Modern** nonlethal damage system is all or nothing: A character who takes a lot of nonlethal damage must save or be knocked out, but smaller amounts of such damage have absolutely no effect. The repercussions of such a system seem to bother some players.

Fisticuffs at Low Levels

One common complaint is that two 1st-level characters, both of whom have average Strength and no feats or special abilities, have no chance of ever harming one another in a fist fight. It's true that if two such characters simply trade blow after blow, neither will ever be knocked out, and neither will ever suffer any real injury. When you think about it, that's actually pretty realistic. (Think back to any schoolyard brawls you ever witnessed -- or took part in -- and you'll see what I mean.)

So how do such fights ever end? Well, there are several ways for untrained 1st-level characters to hurt each other. They can pick up two-by-fours or broken bottles and turn the brawl into an armed melee. One of them can attempt a truly damaging blow (taking the standard -4 penalty for dealing lethal damage with a nonlethal weapon -- in this case, an unarmed strike). Or they can turn the fist fight into a grapple. Once again, such escalation is pretty realistic -- these are the means by which real fist fights transform from mere bruisefests into genuinely dangerous engagements, both in real life and in the movies.

Knockouts at High Levels

Now let's look at the other end of the spectrum -- a high-level character trying to knock out another high-level character. This sort of thing happens all the time in the kind of movies after which many **d20 Modern** campaigns are modeled. The good guy sneaks up behind the bad guy (or vice versa) and clobbers him with a monkey wrench, sending him to the floor instantly.

In the **D&D** subdual system, this scenario becomes virtually impossible if the target is above about 3rd level (or has more than 3 or 4 Hit Dice). To achieve a knockout, you'd have to deal enough subdual damage in a single blow to drop the target's hit points below 0. Using Power Attack, a little magic, a high Strength score, and a powerful weapon (with which you'd have to take the -4 penalty in order to deal subdual damage), you might reliably pull this trick off if the target has, say, 20 hit points. Any more than that and the target is nearly impossible to knock out with a single, silent blow. So a bunch of 11th-level **D&D** characters who want to silently eliminate the relatively weak 6th-level mooks guarding the evil sorcerer's tower have to rely on magic or supernatural abilities. That's fine in the **D&D** game, but it's not that great a solution in **d20 Modern**, where an 11th-level Navy SEAL who sneaks up behind a 6th-level al Qaeda guard ought to have at least a decent chance to knock him out.

Fist Fights and Realism

The **d20 Modern** nonlethal combat system may not let you duplicate a real situation with 100% accuracy, but it's not as though the **D&D** subdual system is perfectly realistic, either. Two 1st-level characters can play fisticuffs for hours using the **d20 Modern** nonlethal system, but one or both of them would be out cold after just a couple of rounds using **D&D**'s subdual system!

In short, the **d20 Modern** nonlethal combat system is based on the concept that it's really not possible to wear someone down through nonlethal attacks. But it is possible to sneak up behind someone, whack him on the back of the head, and knock him out -- even if he's reasonably high in level.

Questions and Answers

Now that we have those issues cleared up, let's have a look at some nonlethal damage questions.

The Brawl feat lets you deal points of nonlethal damage equal to 1d6 + your Str modifier. The Combat Martial Arts feat lets you deal points of either lethal or non-lethal damage equal to 1d4 + your Str modifier. What happens if you have both feats? Can you then deal 1d6 + your Str modifier in lethal damage?

At any given time, you're using either one feat or the other. You can't combine them. In other words, if you want to deal nonlethal damage and don't care if you're considered armed or unarmed, use the Brawl feat to deal a base damage of 1d6 points. If you want to deal lethal damage, and/or you want to make an unarmed attack of opportunity (or not provoke an attack of opportunity when making your unarmed attack), use the Combat Martial Arts feat and deal a base damage of only 1d4 points.

What happens when you combine the use of brass knuckles with the Brawl or Knockout Punch feat?

Brass knuckles allow you to deal lethal damage, and they increase your total damage by +1. If you want to deal lethal damage with brass knuckles, you cannot take advantage of any feat that delivers nonlethal damage only. That means you don't get the benefit of either the Brawl or the Knockout Punch feats.

If you want to deal nonlethal damage while using brass knuckles, here's how things play out. The following figures don't include any Strength bonus that may apply, and the calculations assume that the conditions

necessary to use each feat have been met.

- Brass knuckles + Brawl feat = 1d6+1 points of nonlethal damage
- Brass knuckles + Improved Brawl feat = 1d8+1 points of nonlethal damage
- Brass knuckles + Improved Brawl feat + Knockout Punch feat = 2d8+2 points of nonlethal damage
- Brass knuckles + Improved Brawl feat + Improved Knockout Punch feat = 3d8+3 points of nonlethal damage

So with brass knuckles, Brawl, Improved Brawl, Knockout Punch, and Improved Knockout Punch, you're dealing 3d8+3+(Str bonus x 3) points of nonlethal damage against a flat-footed opponent. With a Strength score of, say, 14, that's 12 to 33 points (average 23). That's enough to knock out -- well, just about anything!

If a character is dazed by a nonlethal attack before her first action in combat, does she remain flat-footed? Could I use a feat such as Knockout Punch, which works only against flat-footed opponents, a second time?

You betcha. If a brawler can keep a target dazed by forcing massive damage saves (even if the target succeeds at the saves), the target remains flat-footed and thus susceptible to Knockout Punch.

In the movies, a trained killer can sneak up on a bad guy, grab him, and break his neck before he even has time to react. I've heard of martial arts techniques for killing someone with a single blow. Why aren't there feats that let you do that sort of thing in the d20 Modern game?

You're right. You see this sort of technique (along with the knife-to-the-throat routine, and the sudden punch that kills someone instantly) all the time in movies. But there are several reasons why we left mechanics that would allow such tactics out of the game.

Mechanically, an instant kill is the same thing as a coup de grace (see page 146 for details). A coup de grace can be carried out only against a helpless opponent. An opponent in melee -- even if he's grappled -- isn't helpless, so you can't kill him with a coup de grace.

More importantly, if the rules allow a player character to kill a GM character instantly, those same rules should also allow the reverse -- and we all know how much fun it is to lose a favorite character to a cheap trick. Thus, even if there really were techniques that would allow an average person to kill another person easily, we'd probably add an element of challenge to them, both to make encounters with GM characters more interesting and to give heroes a chance of survival when such techniques are used against them.

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 designed and written 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.