



Bullet Points

The Devil in the Details

By Owen K.C. Stephens

Welcome to the latest installment of *Bullet Points*. I'm Owen K.C. Stephens, writer of quite a bit of **Star Wars Roleplaying Game** material and contributor to the recently announced *d20 Cyberscape* book, plus some other **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.

The Devil in the Details

In this installment, we'll look at a few questions that raise issues that have broad applications in various areas of play. In general, changing rules to suit your style of play is perfectly acceptable, but problems do sometimes occur when you decide to use a rule differently than the way it's written. So when something seems out of balance in your campaign, check your house rules first to see whether the problem might stem from choices you've made.

Questions and Answers

I chose these questions in particular because they illustrate some common game-play problems. The answers are lengthy because I want to address the questions as well as provide some guidelines on campaign problem-solving.

 I run a **d20 Modern** spy/agent game, and since I like a high tech level for characters, I've allowed players to use some feats, gadgets, and other items from the *d20 Future* supplement. However, the various "X Plus" feats are causing a serious problem. Specifically, one character is a Tough hero who used Tough Plus to take a talent from a book by a 3rd-party publisher at 1st level. It's become obvious after a few games that this talent gives him a serious advantage over the other characters. Now the rest of my players want to use "X Plus" feats to gain new talents from the same book, and I'm afraid my campaign is going to suffer.

This situation has caused me to wonder if the "X Plus" feats are unbalanced. I realize Wizards of the Coast, Inc. didn't publish the book from which this talent came, but it's a very common book that a lot of people are using. Given its popularity, I don't think it's too much to ask that Wizards make sure its official material balances with it. After all, if Wizards doesn't keep the game balanced, how am I supposed to?


Nothing I say in this answer, or indeed in the column overall, should be taken as a condemnation of d20 System

material offered by publishers other than Wizards of the Coast, Inc. Some of it is good, and some of it isn't, and players and GMs must decide what they like on their own, just as they do with the material in the official **d20 Modern** books.

I like a lot of 3rd-party material. Heck, I write plenty of 3rd-party material, so I'm certainly not suggesting that none of it is useful. However, it's unrealistic to expect the designers who write the official **d20 Modern** books to make their work dovetail precisely with any material not published by Wizards of the Coast, no matter how good it is or how commonly it's used. No one designer could possibly be familiar with all of the material on the market. And even if comprehensive knowledge were possible, not all the 3rd-party material is balanced in the same way. The **d20 Modern** books published by Wizards of the Coast, Inc. are balanced to work with material in its other **d20 Modern** books, period. If you mix it in with material from the **Dungeons and Dragons** game, the **Star Wars** Roleplaying Game, or any other d20 System game, you'll have to keep a sharp eye on your game balance.


One of the best ways to check such material for balance is simply to observe it in play. I recommend that whenever you allow material from a new sourcebook (no matter who published it) into your game, you warn your players that any unbalancing aspects you discover will be eliminated. Then, if a player discovers a particularly effective combination that you consider unacceptable, you can simply rule that the particular set of feats/talents/spells in question isn't available -- or is available only with the changes you deem necessary to maintain game balance.

As for your specific problem, the simplest solution I can see is to limit the "X Plus" feats to talents detailed in the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game**, since those are the talents for which the feats were designed anyway. Even if other talents are available for players to choose as their characters attain higher levels, they cannot choose them as benefits for these feats. This technique should prevent the kind of abuses you've encountered without completely eliminating either the *d20 Future* material or the new talents you want to use in your campaign.

 **I'm having a bit of trouble with a powergamer playing a Charismatic hero in my *d20 Future* campaign. In my opinion, this character is abusing the inspiration talent. He used the Charismatic Plus feat to gain this talent at first level, and he's been using it almost constantly ever since. He effectively gives the other two PCs a permanent +2 bonus on all their skill checks in relaxed situations. Need to hack into a computer? Get inspired first! And if his inspiration check fails, he just tells the other PC to wait a minute so that he can "try a different speech," then tries the check again the following round. Shouldn't there be a limit to what he can and can't do with this talent?**

First of all, I'm not surprised to find someone who likes to get the most out of a set of rules creating a Charismatic hero. After all, a character with a decent Diplomacy modifier can get past a lot of encounters just by talking until people like him. But the six basic classes are all well balanced, so a Charismatic hero is no more or less likely than any other to be a rules lawyer's class of choice.

More importantly, however, you're allowing the inspiration talent to do something it's not designed to do -- namely, provide bonuses on skill checks. The description of the talent specifically says that it provides a +2 morale bonus on saving throws, attack rolls, and damage rolls. Although the prerequisite for the inspiration talent (coordinate) does modify skill checks, inspiration does not. Furthermore, both ability descriptions specify that their effects last only for a number of rounds equal to the Charismatic hero's Charisma modifier, so the Charismatic hero can't grant a bonus on a skill check that takes longer than the duration of coordinate. Thus, although he can use coordinate to grant an abundance of bonuses on skill checks, he can't grant a bonus on a Craft check made to build items or structures, or on any skill check on which the acting character takes 20.

 I'm running a gritty, realistic, street-level d20 Modern campaign with no magic, psionics, or other weirdness. The heroes have just reached 3rd level, and the group's Strong hero has taken a level of Martial Artist. He has a Strength score of 18, plus the melee smash talent and the Combat Martial Arts, Streetfighting, and Power Attack feats. Thus, he deals 1d6+1d4+6 points of damage with an unarmed strike, for an average of 11 points. That's almost the maximum damage for a pistol. And the situation just gets worse when he uses Power Attack -- which he almost always does -- since he has a +7 attack bonus while everyone else has +4 or so.

I just don't think this situation is realistic. What am I missing? Do I need to double the damage dealt by a pistol to make using a weapon preferable to punching a foe?

First of all, a Strong hero couldn't possibly take Martial Artist as his 3rd character level. The entry requirements for the advanced class include a +3 base attack bonus, so the earliest he can qualify is Strong hero 3, in which case his first level of Martial Artist is his fourth character level. When a character gains a new level, he must apply its benefits in a particular order (see page 39 in the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*). In this case, he can't add his new attack bonus before choosing a class.

Second, the average damage for 1d6+1d4+6 is actually 12, not 11 (3.5 + 2.5 + 6). That calculation doesn't become relevant until the character becomes a 4th-level Martial Artist, since only then can he have living weapon. And since by then he will likely have taken improved melee smash, he should be able to deal 1d6+1d4+7 points of damage (average 13). The +1d4 component of that damage that stems from Streetfighting, however, applies to only one attack per round. That restriction may not seem like much of a limitation now, but it will once the characters are 6th level or higher.

But is this damage excessive? The character you are concerned about is clearly a dedicated unarmed fighter, and you seem to be comparing him to casual pistol users. Consider instead a 3rd-level Fast hero with a Dexterity score plus the increased speed talent and the Point Blank Shot and Double Tap feats. This Gunslinger-in-training has a +6 attack bonus (+7 within 30 feet), or +4 (+5 within 30 feet) if using Double Tap to deal an additional die of damage. Equipped with a Desert Eagle, the Fast hero can consistently crank out 3d8 points of damage per round and is quick enough to stay out of reach of the Strong hero's unarmed attacks. Once she takes a level or two of Gunslinger, the Fast hero becomes even more dangerous.

Overall, a character designed to be dangerous in unarmed combat should be able to compete with characters carrying pistols unless you specifically design a campaign to disallow that concept. The *d20 Modern* game is designed for cinematic action adventure, not a totally realistic simulation of real-world ballistics and combat styles. After all, adventure fiction is full of high-kicking heroes who take out scads of pistol-wielding thugs. Your Strong hero/Martial Artist character obviously follows this tradition, and is thus rightfully as dangerous as (but not necessarily more dangerous than) a dedicated firearms expert with levels in the Gunslinger class.