

Story Skills RPG System

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The Story Skills System (S3) was an attempt to design a simple yet fun RPG system with no levels or grinding. Thus games could be played forever without running out of suitably challenging encounters.

This is a stand alone guide to the basic mechanics of S3 which was invented for the story setting “Heroes of Verdenen” and later expanded for the modern setting, “Mad Science”.

The S3 system, as you will soon see, is driven by story telling and follows a strong “make it up as you go along” model. It is designed to allow Narrator (aka GM/DM) and players to invent the story on the fly. The Narrator is encouraged to make up skills, attributes, and statuses to fit the story. While this might seem unusual, it is designed to encourage developing an immersive story to role-play within.

“No matter how many goblins you kill, when you face a giant dragon remember that you are still soft and squishy and taste good with ketchup.”

What will you need?

At the very least, you will need a pencil or pen, some paper and a few dice. You will need a couple of d8 and a handful of d6. A story setting would probably make life easier for the narrator.

The Narrator will need percentile dice.

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Characters

Characters have a number of attributes that you may find familiar from other RPGs. They do not, however have XP or HP. The human body, even when trained to physical perfection is still soft and squishy so try not to pick any fights with giant dragons.

Character Concepts

The background, class, job, and hero style of your character form the core concept. You may select an additional three novice skills that fit your overall concept and back-story. These may be anything so long as the Narrator and other players are broadly in agreement.

To help further flesh out your character, the Narrator may choose to add an additional skill (any rank), attribute, or status. Narrators should use these to reward interesting and well thought out character ideas as well as immersive role play within the character concept.

When designing your character concept, you should do so with the other players and include in your back story an explanation of how your characters came to be working together as well as agreeing what sort of game you want to play.

Playing your character

Playing a character is a test of your improvisational and acting skills. The Narrator will reward your character with interesting additional skills, attributes, or statuses “discovered” through role play and narrative (the game itself).

For example, Jeff is playing, Henry, a Gentleman Thief with a Nobility background. Henry is attempting to rob the home of a wealthy noble when he fails a skill check for stealth.

The butler discovers Henry pocketing the silver in the kitchen. Jeff launches into a fantastic monologue explaining that Henry is there to collect the silver for cleaning. The Narrator decides that this was some exceptional role play and rewards Jeff by saying that the butler is taken in by this lie and helps him. Henry gains a competent rank in the skill of “improvised lying”. However, not long after the truth comes out. Henry now gains the status of Wanted. There is a large bounty on his head which will complicate future interactions with the locals, not to mention a now out-of-work butler with a grudge against Henry.

The skill and status for Jeff’s character, Henry were “discovered” through game play and a whole new rich sub-plot was created as a result. In this way, players are active participants in shaping the narrative.

Discovered and implied skills

Sometimes a situation arises where a character needs to use a skill that they do not have listed. If it seems obvious to the Narrator (or the player makes a compelling case why) that the character would have this skill then the Narrator should award the character that skill at an appropriate level. This is known as a implied skill.

Discovered and implied skills allow players to focus on character concepts and role play knowing that any omissions can be unpacked and “discovered” in the course of the game. This makes the game itself more fluid and keeps the focus on the story.

For example, Jess is playing a wondering noble called Lucille. The party is trying to figure out which of two seemingly identical paintings is a forgery. Jess makes the case that Lucille’s background was that her father is a dealer in fine arts. Lucille, Jess says, would have some experience of them herself. The Narrator agrees and grants her an amateur skill level in “Art Appraisal”. She combines that with her recall Transferable Skill and has four dice to attempt to discern the fake.

Skills, attributes, and statuses

The aim of this model is to furnish players with the minimum details necessary to play a character. Thus the character has a few attributes, a status or two and a number of skills – all of which are used to drive the story forward.

Skills (covered later) determine what the character can do. Attributes and statuses influence things in special circumstances for the character. They are used to keep track of details that further game play. It is not necessary to exhaustively work out which skills the character has as unused skills (from say class, or job) can be assigned as the players learn what they want to do with the character.

Attributes are permanent. They cover things like life (covered in a moment), social standing, and reputation. Statuses are temporary and can be things like “banned from the tavern”, “wanted for burglary”, or “moral obligation” (where the character has a promise they have yet to fulfil).

The Narrator should use his/her imagination and make up attributes and especially status on the fly.

Attributes, and statuses

There are a few common attributes which all characters have but Narrators should liberally invent new ones to fit the story.

Life

Characters have life with (usually) 6 stars in it. This indicates the amount of wounds you can take before expiring. Any wound, infection, ailment, toxin, etc., that exceeds half your total remaining life, kills you instantly. This is because getting hit with a big sword is no picnic no matter how tough you are. Life regenerates slowly – unless infected, each wound will take 4+1d4 days (per star) to recover. Infected wounds do not heal and have a 5% chance per day of getting worse (costing you another star).

Social standing

Social standing determines how other people see you. This is particularly important when trying to influence other people. The greater the difference between your character and the person they are trying to influence the harder (CL/DR) the task (see skills). This difference is doubled when attempting to influence your “betters”. Although the labels may differ from one setting to another, social standing will generally follow something like this:

1. Drifter (a town drunk, for example)
2. Labourer
3. Serviceman
4. Tradesman
5. Merchant
6. Gentry
7. Nobility
8. Royalty

For example, a Labourer asking a favour from a prince may face 12 points of difficulty. See the section on Modifying CL/DR by DR; the chances are, the Labourer is not going to have much luck (See skills).

Example statuses

As part of the “make it up as you go along” atheistic, the Narrator is encouraged to invent statuses which add flavour to your character based on what you do in the game. Rather than prescribing a set of fixed statuses, the ones afflicting (or helping) your character may be unique to you. Here are some examples.

Conflicted

Example: Your character was hired to lie to the girl but she’s really nice and you have debated telling her the truth only to be stopped by another party member.

The Challenge Level (CL) is increased by one point for you when using Focus base skills in the presence of the girl. This would make a good prompt for further story creation.

Wanted by the law

Example: You fail a stealth check while stealing a valuable item.

It is an open secret that you were the one that pulled off this crime and local law enforcement want to talk to you. The Difficulty Rating (DR) for working with the local criminal element has decreased but the Challenge Level (CL) for staying hidden from the law has increased.

Luck of a devil

Example: You roll mostly sixes and pass a skill check everyone expected you to fail. The Narrator declares that your character has become extremely lucky.

For the rest of the day, you may re-roll the lowest dice on any skill checks. This status ends if you fail a skill test.

Mobbed by fans (Sometown)

Example: You make a skill check on your flute playing skill to entertain the locals and earn some coin. You rolled far more than the necessary successes and have suddenly become very popular.

Whenever you are in Sometown, locals swarm around you asking you to play another song. You never have to pay for beer or a bed but you cannot go anywhere without being recognised and swamped by fans. You get a bonus 1d4 when using your flute in Sometown.

The 8 point skill scale

Everything in S3 is based on skills. Skills are used to tackle tasks (things you want your character to do). With few exceptions everything about your character is described by skills. Character skills can be one of 8 levels with each successive level being harder to achieve but granting stronger bonuses.

Level	Description	Points	Dice
Untrained	The skill level you would expect from someone who has maybe has never even heard of this task before	0	1d4 (1)
Novice	You are familiar with the task in theory but lack any practice	1	1d6 (1)
Amateur	Someone who has a chance of knowing what they are talking about	2	1d6 + 1d4 (2)
Competent	A reasonably well practised person with an employment worthy skill level	4	2d6 (2)
Professional	This skills of someone who does this for a living	8	1d8 + 2d6 (3)
Expert	Someone who has dedicated a substantial amount of time to becoming noted in this field	16	1d8 + 3d6 (4)
Master	One of a select few individuals who are famously good at this skill.	32	2d8 + 4d6 (6)
Genius	A person with a supernatural gift for this subject who has probably dedicated their entire life to this field to the exclusion of everything else.	64	2d8 + 5d6 (7)

Challenge and Difficulty

Tasks have a CL (Challenge Level) from 1 (Nominal) to 8 (Unthinkable). The player must roll successes equal to or above the CL of the task to achieve it. Tasks also have a DR (Difficult Rating) the DR determines how hard it is to achieve a success. The DR is the number that you must roll at or above to count as a success.

For example, Making a cheese and tomato sandwich might have a CL-1/DR-2. You would expect most people to make a reasonable go of it even if they have never tried before. On the other hand, making the sandwich so that it is good enough to set before the King while in the dark in an unfamiliar kitchen might have a CL-4/DR-4. Even a professional has a reasonable chance of failing.

Generally, CL is an indicator of the raw skill needed to make the thing happen while DR is a measure of the complexity of the task.

1. *Nominal*
2. Uncomplicated
3. Challenging
4. Difficult
5. **Hard**
6. **Taxing**
7. **Impossible**
8. **Unthinkable**

Skills

Skills are obtained in one of two ways – they are either added to the character at character creation or “discovered” during the narrative. Skill discovery forms an important dynamic of the game play experience.

Transferable Skills

Transferable skills (TS) are your characters general strengths and weaknesses. They are grouped into four sets – Mind, Body, Technique, and Learning. Each character has one strong (Professional), two moderate (Competent), and a weak (Novice) TS set. These skill levels set the overall skill for all TS in the set. Additionally, you may have a number of points determined by your background to spend enhancing the individual skills in a given set.

As transferable skills (TS) are not usually tested directly they are not likely to change from one play session to the next. Transferable skills are the only skills not really subject to the “make it up as you go along” rule.

Transferable Skills			
Mind	Body	Technique	Learning
Charisma Intelligence Wisdom Focus	Dexterity Constitution Strength Reflexes	Movement Physicality Athletics Tools	Languages Literacy Study Recall

Background points

The narrator (or story setting) will usually provide you with a choice of a number of backgrounds. These backgrounds award (usually 14) points to be used to enhance specific skills in one or more of the transferable skill sets (for example, Movement and Tools in the Technique set).

Bonus Dice From Transferable Skills

Characters have a number of Transferable Skills which provide bonus dice to the skill up to the total number and size of the dice already available. An untrained check on, say, a swim skill from a character with an athletic skill set might have 1d8 + 2d6 (3 dice) available but could only add an additional 1d4 (1 die) for a total of 2d4 in an untrained skill check. This means that a character with a skill level of competent might, in the right circumstances, be able to attempt a difficult task.

Skill Competency Levels

Level	Points	Dice
Untrained	0	1d4 (1)
Novice	1	1d6 (1)
Amateur	2	1d6 + 1d4 (2)
Competent	4	2d6 (2)
Professional	8	1d8 + 2d6 (3)
Expert	16	1d8 + 3d6 (4)
Master	32	2d8 + 4d6 (6)
Genius	64	2d8 + 5d6 (7)

TS Bonus Dice Pool

The dice pool for each TS is the total of the dice for the group rank plus the dice for the individual skill. For example a character untrained in Athletics (1d4) but with Professional rank (1d8 + 2d6) in Technique would have a total of 1d8 + 2d6 + 1d4 (4 dice) in their dice pool for Athletics.

A few skills may have two forms. In these rare cases, the skills can be combined which the story setting will explain.

Specific Skills

Most of the time when we talk about skills we are talking about specific skills. Specific skills are the skills you have for doing things (fighting, praying, magic, etc.). Everything you do is a skill check. Skills come from a background, class, job, and hero style at character creation and from the Narrator thereafter.

Skill Advancement

Any specific skill that a character achieves success with in an untrained skill check may make a second skill check at DR+1 to attempt to become novice. All further progressions require story driven rewards up to a maximum of competent. The Narrator may choose to allow you a point towards a skill for any given day wherein you roll one success in a skill where the CL was equal to or higher than the dice you have for your skill level.

Skill ranks beyond competent are reserved for specialisations (class, job, and hero style). Progression to Professional competency and above must be completed by undertaking an Epic Accomplishment (such as winning a grand tournament, completing a master work or fulfilling an epic quest). It is recommended that the character only be allowed to do so when they have, since they reached their current rank, achieved at least as many successes at a hard (or harder) task as the point value of the next rank.

Achieving Genius rank in a skill is akin to the apex of the character's carrier. A character should only have one such skill and then only as the result of some extreme epic achievement worthy of worldwide fame.

Adding skills

During character creation you may gain a skill more than once. To combine these duplicate skills add the points from the above table for each skill rank. If the sum of the points is equal to a higher rank in that skill then this higher rank is your characters skill rank. If you fall short, note any points invested towards the next rank as you may be offered the opportunity to make up the difference through narrative means.

For example: Jack is rolling up a noble. He gains Arts and antiquities (Novice, Recall) from his background and Arts and antiquities (Amateur, Recall) from his class. That makes for a total of 3 points and so his rank is still Amateur. However, he takes the Trader job and takes Arts and antiquities as one of his Amateur skills so the total is now 5. His new rank is Competent and he has a point toward Professional for later in his carrier.

Modifying CL/DR by DR

Some situations call for a modification to CL/DR in terms only of DR. This can result in DR values of more than 6 (which is impossible as DR runs 1 to 6).

If DR changes to at least 2 or at most 6 then the DR changes are applied directly. Otherwise divide the change by 6 and add the result to CL, add the remainder as DR unless this would cause the DR to exceed 6 or drop below 2 in which case add an additional CL (if CL would drop past 1 it

becomes 1). Thus, CL-1/DR-3 plus 6 DR becomes CL-2/DR-3; CL-1/DR-5 plus 3 DR becomes CL-2/DR-5; CL-5/DR-3 minus -14 DR becomes CL-3/DR-3 minus 2 DR which becomes CL-2/DR-3

Character Creation

Character creation starts with inventing a character concept that fits the story setting. If you are using a pre-built setting (recommended for novice narrators), it will probably have some suggestions or at least some mythology to give you ideas.

Background

Once you have have a concept agreed with your narrator, you should select a background that best fits your concept. If none fit, you may be able to modify one with the help of your narrator.

Backgrounds are a short hand to describe where the character has come from and what skills they might have picked up along the way. Backgrounds also supply points to customise the individual skills in a TS set.

Class

The class is the class of person you are playing. You should pick or create a class that best fits your character concept. Class determines things like moral outlook, lawfulness (or lack thereof) and general attitude to life.

A class may also provide skills that enable you to play as a character from that class.

Jobs

A job is what your character does to get buy in this world. It can provide a basic income (when worked) as well as a set of skills which increase very slowly over time.

The initial job taken during character creation grants certain bonuses which are not available if the job is taken later. It grants one professional, three competent, and four amateur skills from the list of available skills unique to that that job. It has a number of required skills which must be taken. At the end of each year you become a novice in one skill from your job list and gain 4 points to spend on skills from your job list.

Jobs have a set of pre-requisite skills which you must take as character skills when choosing that job later.

Hero Style

As an adventurer, your character has access to skills and abilities uncommon to someone of their job or class. Hero style is selected at character creation and cannot be changed later. It grants one professional, two competent, and four novice skills from the list of available skills some of which may be unique to that that hero style.

At the end of an adventure (sometimes called a quest line, or story arc) in which you have played largely within your hero style, you gain 4 points to spend on skills from your hero style. These may be spent right away or saved for later.

Hero styles are generally tailored to the story setting and match up well to certain job, class, and backgrounds.

Fantastic abilities

Some story settings have spells, gods, super science, or other fantastic abilities. The story setting will give you more details as to how they work but usually these are simply skills like any other. The setting should make clear how these skills apply and the CL/DR of achieving various tasks with these skills.

Opposed skill checks: Combat and conflict

Players should attempt to resolve conflict using improvisation (or character acting) in as far as possible. This will allow for the “discovery” of additional skills implicit in the character concept that the narrator can award the character. In this way players are incentivised to play the role rather than just reach for the dice.

Sometimes, however, conflict – for example fights – come down to an impasse of skills. When that happens, combat and other exchanges are resolved with opposed skill checks.

In a sword fight for example, the narrator first calculates the inequality. This is simply the difference in dice between the two fighters. This inequality will be added to the DR for the character with the least dice.

The first character will roll dice which sets the CL to block the incoming attack. Each of the dice that beats the DR adds one to the CL to block. The DR for this is 2 plus any inequality being suffered.

The defender will now have the CL for the block which has a DR for this is 2 plus any inequality being suffered. A successful block allows the defender to return the attack.

The same opposed skill check is used in battering, intimidation, bluffing, and other attempts to use a character’s skills to overcome the skill of another. For example, using stealth to overcome perception (and remain hidden).

The narrator should feel free to simply allow the flow of the story to dictate outcomes especially where dice rolling is grossly unbalanced or might otherwise spoil the immersion.

Glossary of terms

This is a summary of terms used in the S3 system. Where the descriptions says see such and such, it is referring to the section in this guide where you can find more information.

Challenge Level (CL)

The overall challenge of a task. The higher the CL, the more skill that is needed to attempt the task. CL denotes the number of successes the player must roll. CL runs from 1 to 8. See: **The 8 point skill scale**.

Character Creation

The process of creating a character. You will select transferable skill ranks and choose a background, class, job, and hero style. Character creation generally starts with coming up with a character concept. See: **Character Creation**.

Dice Pool

A number of dice available to you. In S3 your dice pool comes from your Transferable Skills (TS). See: **Transferable Skills** and **The 8 point skill scale**.

Difficulty Rating (DR)

At any given CL a task may have different degrees of difficulty. The DR is the value that must be rolled at or above for a roll to count as a success. DR runs from 2 to 6. See: **The 8 point skill scale**.

Epic Accomplishment

Something your character achieves that was above and beyond what an average person might accomplish in their life and worthy of social note. As a rule of thumb, an accomplishment should be considered epic if it is noteworthy enough to become part of the future historical record.

Narrator

The person telling the story. The Narrator will act the other characters you encounter and arbitrate and interpret dice rolls. The narrator role is similar to that of a Games Master or DM. The narrator will react to your character concept and attempt to build the story around it.

Rolling up (a character)

Creating a new character. You need to do this to join in a game or if your character has been killed off and you want to continue playing the story. See: **Character Creation**.

Skills

Abilities of your character. These are things you can do. Skills are generally verbs. All skills have a linked transferable skill from which bonus dice can be drawn. See: **The 8 point skill scale**.

Skill Rank

The level achieved in a given skill. Each rank grants more dice and has a higher associated point value. In story settings with Point Buy or Point Trade skill creation, this value becomes particularly important. Roughly speaking a higher skill rank indicates a greater level of skill. The lowest possible level in a skill is untrained (zero points) and, in theory, all characters have this rank in any skills they do not have listed. Some story systems or narrators may determine that some skills are trained only (meaning they are only available to those that have them). See: **The 8 point skill scale**.

Transferable Skills (TS)

Transferable Skills are a set of basic abilities that grant a bonus to some of your skills. See: **Transferable Skills**.

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