

CHAPTER 3

HOW TO PLAY THE CYPHER SYSTEM



The rules of the Cypher System are quite straightforward at their heart, as all of gameplay is based around a few core concepts.

This chapter provides a brief explanation of how to play the game, and it's useful for learning the game. Once you understand the basic concepts, you'll likely want to reference [Chapter 9: Rules of the Game](#), for a more in-depth treatment.

The Cypher System uses a twenty-sided die (1d20) to determine the results of most actions. Whenever a roll of any kind is called for and no die is specified, roll a d20.

The game master sets a **difficulty** for any given task. There are ten degrees of difficulty. Thus, the difficulty of a task can be rated on a scale of 1 to 10.

Each difficulty has a target number associated with it. The target number is always three times the task's difficulty, so a difficulty 4 task has a target number of 12. To succeed at the task, you must roll the target number or higher. See the Task Difficulty table (page 8) for guidance in how this works.

Character skills, favorable circumstances, or excellent equipment can **decrease the difficulty** of a task. For example, if a character is trained in climbing, she turns a difficulty 6 climb into a difficulty 5 climb. This is called decreasing the difficulty by one step. If she is specialized in climbing, she turns a difficulty 6 climb into a difficulty 4 climb. This is called decreasing the difficulty by two steps.

A **skill** is a category of knowledge, ability,

or activity relating to a task, such as climbing, geography, or persuasiveness. A character who has a skill is better at completing related tasks than a character who lacks the skill. A character's level of skill is either trained (reasonably skilled) or specialized (very skilled).

If you are trained in a skill relating to a task, you decrease the difficulty of that task by one step. If you are specialized, you decrease the difficulty by two steps. A skill can never decrease a task's difficulty by more than two steps.

Anything else that reduces difficulty (help from an ally, a particular piece of equipment, or some other advantage) is referred to as an asset. Assets can never decrease a task's difficulty by more than two steps.

You can also decrease the difficulty of a given task by applying **Effort**. (Effort is described in more detail in Chapter 9: Rules of the Game.)

To sum up, three things can decrease a task's difficulty: skills, assets, and Effort.

If you can decrease a task's difficulty to 0, you automatically succeed and don't need to make a roll.



You don't earn XP for killing foes or overcoming standard challenges in the course of play. Discovery is the soul of the Cypher System.

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TASK DIFFICULTY

Task Difficulty	Description	Target No.	Guidance
0	Routine	0	Anyone can do this basically every time.
1	Simple	3	Most people can do this most of the time.
2	Standard	6	Typical task requiring focus, but most people can usually do this.
3	Demanding	9	Requires full attention; most people have a 50/50 chance to succeed.
4	Difficult	12	Trained people have a 50/50 chance to succeed.
5	Challenging	15	Even trained people often fail.
6	Intimidating	18	Normal people almost never succeed.
7	Formidable	21	Impossible without skills or great effort.
8	Heroic	24	A task worthy of tales told for years afterward.
9	Immortal	27	A task worthy of legends that last lifetimes.
10	Impossible	30	A task that normal humans couldn't consider (but one that doesn't break the laws of physics).

For some people, combat will be an important part of the Cypher System.

However, this is your choice; a Cypher System game doesn't have to be about combat.

WHEN DO YOU ROLL?

Any time your character attempts a task, the GM assigns a difficulty to that task, and you roll a d20 against the associated target number.

When you jump from a burning vehicle, swing an axe at a mutant beast, swim across a raging river, identify a strange device, convince a merchant to give you a lower price, craft an object, use a power to control a foe's mind, or use a blaster rifle to carve a hole in a wall, you make a d20 roll.

However, if you attempt something that has a difficulty of 0, no roll is needed—you automatically succeed. Many actions have a difficulty of 0. Examples include walking across the room and opening a door, using a special ability to negate gravity so you can fly, using an ability to protect your friend from radiation, or activating a device (that you already understand) to erect a force field. These are all routine actions and don't require rolls.

Using skill, assets, and Effort, you can decrease the difficulty of potentially any task to 0 and thus negate the need for a roll. Walking across a narrow wooden beam is tricky for most people, but for an experienced gymnast, it's routine. You can even decrease the difficulty of an attack on a foe to 0 and succeed without rolling.

If there's no roll, there's no chance for failure. However, there's also no chance for remarkable success (in the Cypher System,

that usually means rolling a 19 or 20; see Special Rolls on page 10 and in Chapter 9: Rules of the Game).

COMBAT

Making an attack in combat works the same way as any other roll: the GM assigns a difficulty to the task, and you roll a d20 against the associated target number.

The difficulty of your attack roll depends on how powerful your opponent is. Just as tasks have a difficulty from 1 to 10, creatures have a level from 1 to 10. Most of the time, the difficulty of your attack roll is the same as the creature's level. For example, if you attack a level 2 bandit, it's a level 2 task, so your target number is 6.

It's worth noting that players make all die rolls. If a character attacks a creature, the player makes an attack roll. If a creature attacks a character, the player makes a defense roll.

The damage dealt by an attack is not determined by a roll—it's a flat number based on the weapon or attack used. For example, a spear always does 4 points of damage.

Your **Armor** characteristic reduces the damage you take from attacks directed at you. You get Armor from wearing physical armor (such as a leather jacket in a modern game or chainmail in a fantasy setting) or from special abilities. Like weapon damage, Armor is a flat number, not a roll. If you're

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attacked, subtract your Armor from the damage you take. For example, a leather jacket gives you +1 to Armor, meaning that you take 1 less point of damage from attacks. If a mugger hits you with a knife for 2 points of damage while you're wearing a leather jacket, you take only 1 point of damage. If your Armor reduces the damage from an attack to 0, you take no damage from that attack.

When you see the word "Armor" capitalized in the game rules (other than in the name of a special ability), it refers to your Armor characteristic—the number you subtract from incoming damage. When you see the word "armor" with a lowercase "a," it refers to any physical armor you might wear.

Typical physical weapons come in three categories: light, medium and heavy.

Light weapons inflict only 2 points of damage, but they reduce the difficulty of the attack roll by one step because they are fast and easy to use. Light weapons are punches, kicks, clubs, knives, handaxes, rapiers, small pistols, and so on. Weapons that are particularly small are light weapons.

Medium weapons inflict 4 points of damage. Medium weapons include swords, battleaxes, maces, crossbows, spears, pistols, blasters, and so on. Most weapons are medium. Anything that could be used in one hand (even if it's often used in two hands, such as a quarterstaff or spear) is a medium weapon.

Heavy weapons inflict 6 points of damage, and you must use two hands to attack with them. Heavy weapons are huge swords, great hammers, massive axes, halberds, heavy crossbows, blaster rifles, and so on. Anything that must be used in two hands is a heavy weapon.

BONUSES

Rarely, an ability or piece of equipment does not decrease a task's difficulty but instead adds a bonus to the die roll. Bonuses always add together, so if you get a +1 bonus from two different sources, you have a +2 bonus. If you get enough bonuses to add up to a +3 bonus for a task, treat it as an asset: instead of adding the bonus to your roll, decrease the difficulty by one step. Therefore, you never add more than +1 or +2 to a die roll.

For more on the types of weapons that characters can use, see Chapter 8: Equipment.





For more information on special rolls and how they affect combat and other interactions, see page 193.

SPECIAL ROLLS

When you roll a natural 19 (the d20 shows “19”) and the roll is a success, you also have a minor effect. In combat, a minor effect inflicts 3 additional points of damage with your attack, or, if you’d prefer a special result, you could decide instead that you knock the foe back, distract him, or something similar. When not in combat, a minor effect could mean that you perform the action with particular grace. For example, when jumping down from a ledge, you land smoothly on your feet, or when trying to persuade someone, you convince her that you’re smarter than you really are. In other words, you not only succeed but also go a bit further.

When you roll a natural 20 (the d20 shows “20”) and the roll is a success, you also have a major effect. This is similar to a minor effect, but the results are more remarkable. In combat, a major effect inflicts 4 additional points of damage with your attack, but again, you can choose instead to introduce a dramatic event such as knocking down your foe, stunning

him, or taking an extra action. Outside of combat, a major effect means that something beneficial happens based on the circumstance. For example, when climbing up a cliff wall, you make the ascent twice as fast. When a roll grants you a major effect, you can choose to use a minor effect instead if you prefer.

In combat (and only in combat), if you roll a natural 17 or 18 on your attack roll, you add 1 or 2 additional points of damage, respectively. Neither roll has any special effect options—just the extra damage.

Rolling a natural 1 is always bad. It means that the GM introduces a new complication into the encounter.

RANGE AND SPEED

Distance is simplified into three categories: immediate, short, and long.

Immediate distance from a character is within reach or within a few steps. If a character stands in a small room, everything in the room is within immediate distance. At most, immediate distance is 10 feet (3 m).

Short distance is anything greater than immediate distance but less than 50 feet (15 m) or so.

Long distance is anything greater than short distance but less than 100 feet (30 m) or so. Beyond that range, distances are always specified—500 feet (152 m), a mile (2 km), and so on.

The idea is that it's not necessary to measure precise distances. Immediate distance is right there, practically next to the character. Short distance is nearby. Long distance is farther off.

All weapons and special abilities use these terms for ranges. For example, all melee weapons have immediate range—they are close-combat weapons, and you can use them to attack anyone within immediate distance. A thrown knife (and most other thrown weapons) has short

range. A bow has long range. An adept's **Onslaught** ability also has short range.

A character can move an immediate distance as part of another action. In other words, he can take a few steps over to the control panel and activate a switch. He can lunge across a small room to attack a foe. He can open a door and step through.

A character can move a short distance as his entire action for a turn. He can also try to move a long distance as his entire action, but the player might have to roll to see if the character slips, trips, or stumbles as the result of moving so far so quickly.

For example, if the PCs are fighting a group of cultists, any character can likely attack any cultist in the general melee—they're all within immediate range. Exact positions aren't important. Creatures in a fight are always moving, shifting, and jostling, anyway. However, if one cultist stayed back to fire his pistol, a character

Adept, page 29

Onslaught, page 31

Many rules in this system avoid the cumbersome need for precision. Does it really matter if the ghost is 13 feet away from you or 18? Probably not. That kind of needless specificity only slows things down and draws away from, rather than contributes to, the story.

GLOSSARY

Game Master (GM): The player who doesn't run a character, but instead guides the flow of the story and runs all the NPCs.

Nonplayer Character (NPC): Characters run by the GM. Think of them as the minor characters in the story, or the villains or opponents. This includes any kind of creature as well as people.

Party: A group of player characters (and perhaps some NPC allies).

Player Character (PC): A character run by a player rather than the GM. Think of the PCs as the main characters in the story.

Player: The players who run characters in the game.

Session: A single play experience. Usually lasts a few hours. Sometimes one adventure can be accomplished in a session. More often, one adventure is multiple sessions.

Adventure: A single portion of the campaign with a beginning and an end. Usually defined at the beginning by a goal put forth by the PCs and at the end by whether or not they achieve that goal.

Campaign: A series of sessions strung together with an overarching story (or linked stories) with the same player characters. Often, but not always, a campaign involves a number of adventures.

Character: Anything that can act in the game. Although this includes PCs and human NPCs, it also technically includes creatures, aliens, mutants, automatons, animate plants, and so on. The word "creature" is usually synonymous.



In the Cypher System, players make all die rolls. If a character attacks a creature, the player makes an attack roll. If a creature attacks a character, the player makes a defense roll.

Chapter 4: Creating Your Character, page 14

Experience points, page 219

GM intrusion, page 193

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A d6 is used most often for recovery rolls (page 202) and to determine the level of cyphers (page 340).

might have to use her entire action to move the short distance required to attack that foe. It doesn't matter if the cultist is 20 feet (6 m) or 40 feet (12 m) away—it's simply considered short distance. It does matter if he's more than 50 feet (15 m) away because that distance would require a long move.

EXPERIENCE POINTS

Experience points (XP) are rewards given to players when the GM intrudes on the story (this is called **GM intrusion**) with a new and unexpected challenge. For example, in the middle of combat, the GM might inform the player that he drops his weapon. However, to intrude in this manner, the GM must award the player 2 XP. The rewarded player, in turn, must immediately give one of those XP to another player and justify the gift (perhaps the other player had a good idea, told a funny joke, performed an action that saved a life, and so on).

Alternatively, the player can refuse the GM intrusion. If he does so, he doesn't get the 2 XP from the GM, and he must also spend 1 XP that he already has. If the player has no XP to spend, he can't refuse the intrusion.

The GM can also give players XP between sessions as a reward for making discoveries during an adventure. Discoveries are interesting facts, wondrous secrets, powerful artifacts, answers to mysteries, or solutions to problems (such as where the kidnappers are keeping their victim or how the PCs repair the starship). You don't earn XP for killing foes or overcoming standard

challenges in the course of play. Discovery is the soul of the Cypher System.

Experience points are used primarily for character advancement (for details, see **Chapter 4: Creating Your Character**), but a player can also spend 1 XP to reroll any die roll and take the better of the two rolls.

CYPHERS

Cyphers are abilities that have a single use. A character can carry cyphers and use them during the game. The form they take depends on the setting. In a fantasy world they might be spells or potions, but in a science fiction game they could be alien crystals or just inspirations.

Characters will find new cyphers frequently in the course of play, so players shouldn't hesitate to use their cypher abilities. Because cyphers are always different, the characters will always have new special powers to try.

OTHER DICE

In addition to a d20, you'll need a d6 (a six-sided die). Rarely, you'll need to roll a number between 1 and 100 (often called a d100 or d% roll), which you can do by rolling a d20 twice, using the last digit of the first roll as the "tens" place and the last digit of the second roll as the "ones" place. For example, rolling a 17 and a 9 gives you 79, rolling a 3 and an 18 gives you 38, and rolling a 20 and a 10 gives you 00 (also known as 100). If you have a d10 (a ten-sided die), you can use it instead of the d20 to roll numbers between 1 and 100.

