**TABULA RASA**

That is Latin for “blank slate” and it lives up to that name.

I’m Harley Dutton and I wrote this shit. Thanks to Niel and Stefan for helping me with it.

I both love and hate this so feel free to give me whatever feedback you like.

I had a plan for this system once upon a time. I had a whole bunch of ideals I was trying to instill in it once upon a time. Now I just want to finish it and play some games with it because I think the players (AND DM) make a far greater impact than tuning the rules ever could to the amount of fun a game using it is.

I have put a bunch of assertions, suggestions, commands, and advise into this for how to roleplay or tell stories. I’m not going to bother explaining them. Trust that they will make the game better or don’t, I don’t care.

**HOW THE GAME WORKS -- EVERYONE READ THIS SECTION!**

**My assumptions**

My assumptions are that you know your way around an RP system well enough I don’t have to explain things like what a check is or what its for. I do not however assume you are any good at roleplaying and have noob tips everywhere as my system will absolutely let you fuck everything up. There is no safety net.

Because I’m an ass I’m also going to assume you know won’t recognize some basic mathematics notation but with a gentle reminder you will remember it. [1,5] means between one and five including both one and five as choices. I use this square-bracket range notation throughout.

**Required materials**

Paper, pencils/pens, dice (d6’s, d10’s, and d12/d20’s in various colors), people, a meeting place and time. The dice can be substituted for the dice app I have written for this. Its for android.

**There are no tables of loot or starting gear**

Players should ask the DM what kind of starting gear is reasonably for the setting the DM decides on. The DM should make up their own damn items if they plan on giving the players items during the story.

**Combat, stealth, perception, lying, and persuasion**

I haven’t included rules for a bunch of really common and important aspects of roleplaying for the reasons stated in some early section.

I have, however written some incredibly light guidelines because I doubt you have ever considered playing without the rules for some of these and I wouldn’t want to leave you dazed and confused.

Take turns. Clockwise is good. Sequenced rounds are good too. Teamwork often necessitates players take turns out of order or at the same time. Make sure no one is taking more turns than they are supposed to. Each of the DM’s character gets a turn on the DM’s turn though. Mostly relevant in combat. takes care of itself most other times. When you have characters that are meaningfully faster than others but still want to allow for teamwork with out of turn defensive actions and actions taken together you can give everyone a speed score and play in rounds. When everyone is out of temporary speed the round restarts. At the beginning of each round everyone gets temporary peed up to their speed score. Temporary speed can be spent on actions. Determine how much it costs to level up the speed score with experience. Easy peasy.

Give each character a way to attack, defend, move, hide, see, lie, detect lies, persuade, and resist persuasion. Some skills that are created will do multiple of these. Standardize the names whenever possible for the sake of your DM’s sanity. Attacking and defending are necessary for combat. Movement is important for combat, chases, and stealth. Being able to hide and detect hidden characters are the relevant skills for stealth situations. Being able to see, lie, detect lies, persuade, and resist persuasion are the relevant skills for social encounters. It is possible but unlikely for a player to do without one of these on their character sheet and still resolve conflicts related to it maturely.

Realize that it’s up to you how you handle damage, wounds, death. I prefer to roleplay it as I find assigning a number to something as nebulous as lifeforce distasteful. Just remember that however you decide to handle it will strongly influence how your players treat combat. Damage is fairly simple to calculate. Just do an opposed check. The magnitude is the damage that gets dealt. Armor and evasive maneuvers would be factored into the defender’s opposed half of the roll. Make starting health something youre comfortable with. Make it possible to level with expeirnece or don’t. figure out how you will handle healing. See it gets reall complicated after you add damage and health rather than just roleplaying it. This table might help if you plan on roleplaying it.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| damage table | |
| MoS | description |
| 0 | compounding wound |
| 1 | mild wound |
| 2 | painful wound |
| 3 | debilitating wound |
| 4 | lethal wound |
| 5 | instant death |

With the exception of stealth situations, you should never need to roll spot checks. Players may still want to roll spot checks when they are stuck for a chance at a hint. See the DM section in information distribution for more info on this.

**Dice and Symbols**

Okay. There are 5 kinds of dice in the present iteration. Here is a table showing them all.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 12 or 20 |
| posd6 |  | g | g | s | s | sg |  |  |  |  |  |
| posd10 |  | g | g | s | s | sg | sg | ss | ss | ssg |  |
| negd6 |  | b | b | f | f | fb |  |  |  |  |  |
| negd10 |  | b | b | f | f | fb | fb | ff | ff | ffb |  |
| fateDie | B | a smattering of single 's's, 'f's, 'g's, and 'b's as well as blanks for the remaining sides | | | | | | | | | G |

Key to above table:

s = success

f = failure

g = good stuff

b = bad stuff

G = crit-good-stuff and a success

B = crit-bad-stuff and a failure

Note-to-self: I haven’t finished the fateDie so I don’t know how big I want it. Im pretty sure I want to make the best and worst possible sides the crit sides. This means no double successes or failures. I think a success and a good-stuff is fine and the same goes for the inverse as a crit is the same but better.

Note-to-self: I think the table for the d6’s and d10’s might be wrong. I used the rules that an s/f cost 4 pips, a g/b cost 2 pips, you always buy as much as you can and when you have the choice you favor f/f over g/b. double check this later when you can think straight.

**Checks**

Checks are made by assembling a dice pool from the above dice. The default challenge rating is 2 negative d10’s. This can change is the task is more difficult by default. the fate die is included in every roll. A character’s stats determine how many positive d10’s they get to add to the dice pool. positive and negative d6’s are added to checks to reflect the situation surrounding a check. Adverse conditions might get a negative one and having the correct tool might get a positive one.

**The basic dice pool**

Okay so here is how you assemble a dice pool. First you take a number of positive d10’s equal to the rating the character has in the skill they are trying to use—this is usually [1,3]. Then you consult the difficulty chart in the ether. The suggested range is 1 to 5 negative d10’s as difficulty. Two is standard difficulty, 3 is hard, 1 is trivial, 5 is nigh impossible and so on above 5.

You always add the one fate die to every dice pool.

**Adding situational modifiers to the dice pool**

Note-to-self: I think this section is out of order with the explanation of good and bad stuff.

Basically situational modifiers are anything that will make a task/check harder or easier relative to normal. For each thing making a task easier or harder add a positive or negative d6 as appropriate. These often come from good/bad-stuff but certainly don’t have to.

So what’s the difference between “increasing the difficulty” (adding negative d10’s) and “making the task harder” (adding negative d6’s)? lifting a bucket of rocks is a normal difficulty task (2 negative d10) while lifting a car is an impossible task (5 or more negative d10’s). If it was raining or your character was tired in either scenario you would add a negative d6. Two if the character was both tired and working in the rain. Characters can also get bonus d6’s from their flavor. More than one even.

**Success and Failure**

Once the dice pool is assembled (an arduous task requiring much discussion and explanation for the origin of each die added to the pool) it is rolled. Successes shown cancel failures and good-stuffs showing cancel bad-stuffs. Very-good-stuff counts as a success and it also cancel all good-stuff and bad-stuff in a roll. The same is true of very-bad-stuff with respect to failure. If the net success is 1 or greater the roll is a success and the magnitude is determined by the number of successes. A check fails if there are the same number of successes as failures of fewer successes than failures. Magnitude of failure is rarely if ever used.

**Excess successes/failures and good/bad-stuff**

Usually but not always there is some absolute number associated with a completed task. “You manage to fix the thing in 10 minutes.” “you hit the guy for 27 hit points.” “that thing weighs 50 pounds.” Whenever a check generates excess successes spend them on relative multipliers to numbers like these using this chart table. Remember excess is the number of successes above one as you always need one to succeed. This means you start in the fourth row where it says “0” and move up or down depending on what you have to spend.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| excess failures/successes | multipliers (pick either column as appropriate) | |
| -3 | 2 | 0.5 |
| -2 | 1.5 | 0.66 |
| -1 | 1.33 | 0.75 |
| 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 1 | 0.75 | 1.33 |
| 2 | 0.66 | 1.5 |
| 3 | 0.5 | 2 |

Excess good and bad stuff can also be spent in this way. In this case excess refers to the number above one as a minimum as if any good/bad-stuff are generated in a roll at least one must be resolved. Excess simply refers to those good/bad-stuffs that are generated and not resolved.

**Good and Bad Stuff**

Good-stuff and bad-stuff cancel and so the net of the symbols show determines how many of these things occur. The DM must resolve at least one of any good/bad-stuffs that appear but need not do more than that. Furthermore good/bad-stuff should be caused by the action that spawns it but should not affect the outcome of that task. In other words, it should mostly unrelated to the roll except in origin. It should also have a fairly small effect on the game. Resolving good and bad stuff is very simple. In the game something good or bad happens. That’s it. It can and usually should be fairly minimal.

**Critical good and bad stuff**

Critical good/bad stuff removes all other good and bad stuff from a roll. When these occur, they should steal the spotlight and do something similar to normal good/bad-stuff only far more amazing.

**Opposed checks**

Idk these seem pretty obvious to me as all checks are opposed checks between a character and god (the DM) so changing it to character1 and character2 should be fairly straight forward. Just have one character be represented by positive dice and symbols and the other by negative.

**Assisted checks**

When one player helps another with a skill check how does affect the dice pool for that check? If they both have the skill being used use the higher value and add a positive d6. If they don’t both have the skill just add the positive d6. If it is reasonable for more than one person to help add a d6 for each. If something is a one-man-job you ant get help on it.

**Contests as checks**

This is where more than two characters all/both roll to see who accomplishes the same task best. The most common example is a race. It is also the most frequent time to use magnitude of failure. (in a hypothetical battle between tons of NPC’s that cannot be resolved in one turn, but where progress must be visible to players magnitude of failure can describe troop loss in a more reasonably manner than magnitude of success). In any event the process is that each character/group assembles a dice pool without a difficulty rating (negative d10’s) and rolls it. The successes each character/group gets are compared and so are the net good/bad-stuffs. These can then be used to resolve things in the game. either don’t break ties or find your own way to do it.

**Where do characters get actions they can take**

I have deliberately not included a list of powers a player can slap on their character. This is both because I am lazy I always hated powers lists for a couple reasons. The first is that they restrict your possibilities in character creation. The second it that they make it so a new character has a ton of shit to look through if they want to make a character and in extreme cases (shadowrun and gurps) it can take veterans hours to make a new character. In any event in my system players get to make their own story appropriate powers and special abilities for their characters. This process must involve the DM. If you don’t ask them if you can take a power there is a pretty good chance you will have to rework your character. The powers/abilities characters make can be as fantastic or mundane as that DM is interested in allowing. It’s a pretty good idea to have a mixture of specific powers and generic powers. An example of what I mean by specific vs generic:(“hacking windows systems” and “computers”).

**Charts and such**

**PLAYER SECTION**

**In character voice**

Figure out what voices or accents you can speak using. Pick one. Play a character based around it. The easiest way to get and stay in character and thus play your character well is to speak in a alternate voice/accent while speaking in character and reverting back to your normal speaking voice when speaking out of character.

**Character creation**

Character creation is pretty simple. Thing of some things you want your character to be good at. Write them down and get them okayed by your storyteller. Next, ask your storyteller how many starting experience you get. Allocate this experience into your starting skills/powers/abilities/whatever you want to call them. You’re about a third done. Come up with some flavor for your character. This is your items, your money, your species, your history, your reputation, the organizations you are a part of, personal relationships, etc.

**Crappy flavor**

Crappy flavor usually falls into one of a few categories:

Its overly specific: “incapable of lying on the full moon while drinking tea and balancing on one foot.” This example is overkill but you get the point.

It relates to a skill: the skill “stealth” should not be paired with the flavor “stealthy” because how good you are at stealth is defined by how many points you have in it. At best this is a redundant oversight. At worst it is power-gaming. (power-gaming is bad because it fucks up the campaign balance unless everyone does it)

It too closely resembles another piece of flavor the character already has: I have never seen this one not be power-gaming.

**upgrading skills and experience**

You use experience to upgrade skills. I recommend the dm give out one or two exp per session or in-game night. Either is fine. Its pretty simple. Loose one experience to upgrade a skill by one level.

**Getting new skills**

This is also pretty simple. Spend one experience to get the first level. As usual ask you DM if you can take the skill you want. If you’re well into the story he might make you roleplay learning it from someone.

**Getting new flavor**

New flavor is only obtained by roleplaying. “act for your flavor” or “Dance for your dinner” or whatever it is.

**Group character creation**

Group character creation is where all the players and the storyteller make all the players’ characters as a group. I have found that this is a good way to make the first session (usually character creation) more interesting, make characters better and more interesting (on average), and bond characters to each other so they form a group rather than a collection of individuals. Additionally, it often helps if the DM or group decides what kind of party the player characters will be before anyone spits out their personal character concept. After that, the process is that everyone talks about a rough character idea out loud and everyone else helps them flesh it out. Take turns doing this until it is ready. Its okay for characters to fill the same niche. It quite literally builds character when people modify your character for you in ways you didn’t necessarily want. Most of the time its really cool.

**Example flavor and skills and also defaults**

If you or your group needs some inspiration take a look at these tables of sample skills and flavor. Additionally some of these might be considered defaults for the game. (all characters might want ranks in “persuasion” and “willpower” for social interactions in games where characters are always trying to get each other to do stuff.

Flavor dump: *Captain of the guard. Beautiful singing voice. Strong. Wise. Recognizable facial scar. Pathological liar. Sociopath. Owns a horse. Is liked by horses. Centaur. Gambling problem. Charming. Attractive. Fast. Knowledgeable. Lord of a castle. Friends in high places. Rich. Night vision. Night vision goggles. Owns a spaceship. Carries a spear and club. Leper. Reputation for beating priests. Kind. King’s advisor. Drug dealer. Librarian. Has many rare books. Orc. Insane. Insomniac. Carnivorous. Extra limbs. Amputee. Crippled. Talks to plants. Plants talk back. Holy. Incorporeal. Haunted by past crimes. Haunted by angry ghosts. Has a compass. Stubborn. Magically adept. Bloodthirsty. Good manners. Boxing world champion. Dropped out of medical school. Cult leader. Shift manager at a fast food joint. Famous space pirate. Infertile. Has many decks of cards. Knows Spanish. Is Spanish. Can play the flute. Religious. Sneaky. Large. Fat. Boring. Knows the location of buried treasure. Student at Yale. Responsible for a princeling. Young and stupid. Evil. Charitable.*

Skill dump: *“swordsmanship”, “intimidation”, “stealth”, “empathy”, “persuasion”, “lying”, “running”, “reading and writing”, “speaking Spanish”, “seeing and hearing”, “fire magic”, and “computer hacking”.*

Note-to-self: find/make some more of these

**Don’t be paralyzed by ignorance or fear**

If you need more information get it. If you need more power get it. Don’t sit there like a lump doing nothing. Interact with people even if its rude. Interact with things even if you might lose a hand.

**Don’t argue with or interrupt the storyteller**

Interrupting the storyteller just makes descriptions take longer. This wastes the time of the entire group, something they will not thank you for. Arguing with the DM is in the same vein. Despite this game not having rule to quibble over it does have rulings. Feel free to remind your DM of things but don’t argue.

**Just roll the dice**

Once again there are very few rules to go rummaging through but if you manage it just stop, and roll your dice. Don’t make people wait on your turn. try to do it as fast as possible. 1 minute is a good ballpark for something like combat and 5 or 10 minutes is about right for a solo scene.

**Don’t start immediately**

If you wait 30 mins before starting the game this lets people catch up, maybe get some food, and settle down for the game. can reduce the time players waste talking out of character during the game proper.

**No Phones**

Turn off your phone, put it on mute, put it in a pile with everyone else’s phone. So something to prevent you from getting lost on the internet during the game.

**STORYTELLER SECTION**

**The first rule – “Yes, and…”**

Okay so here’s the deal. The DM is there to empower the players’ characters. This means that the end of your villains’ story arcs is to die, the end of your barmaids’ arcs is to get ploughed, and the goal for any treasure you put in the world it to be found and used if possible and sold otherwise.

Your first thought when your players want to do something is “how can I make this work?” rather than “well, here is a reason that doesn’t work.” You aren’t against the players. You aren’t trying to kill them. You are god and you are supposed to make them the heroes (or villains) of the land. You most certainly are not trying to kill them. You aren’t their enemy even though you wear their skins.

**Making the game**

Pick your setting and describe it to your players.

If you want a say in the matter tell your players what kind of group they have to be or what they have to choose from.

Tell them how much starting experience they get for their players.

Help each player come up with reasonable starting gear and skills for your setting.

**How to make a story concise (this is a good thing)**

If you don’t know why short stories are better than long ones, go ask someone—google perhaps. I’m not devoting the room to telling you.

In any event they are and a good way to make them shorter is to plan out episodes in a flowchart like roadmap. The entire flowchart is your entire story. Each node should be one session and should be completable in exactly one session. Shoot for this. Modify the chart and your storytelling style as necessary to make it fit. After it fits if you have a flowchart that cant fit on a single piece of paper when written in sharpie your story is probably too bit and your group might fall apart. You have been warned. Make short campaigns, and arcs.

**Don’t roll to put on pants**

Don’t make or let players roll for every little thing and certainly don’t do it yourself. This slows the game down and its awful. A check should be reasonably likely to fail or the magnitude of success should matter if you’re going to roll it at all.

**Information distribution**

So, there are 3 ways players get information in the story. The first is the information you give to them. this should never be denied them. if you want your players to have some info give it to them. don’t think you have to make them roll for everything.

The second is the meta-information the players get while playing with you. If you a simple example is that if you lie to them about the seriousness of the dangers you present them with they will stop taking your dangers seriously.

The third is the grease that keeps the story moving when the players get stuck. When players get stuck and don’t know what to do they are almost always either paralyzed by fear or ignorance. If it’s the latter they will roll/should roll to gather more information with history, arcana, science, etc. checks and then you can throw them a hint.

**Dealing with cowardice**

If your players are averse to combat you have a few options. One, give them a way to progress that does not involve combat. Two, arm them better be it with weapons or knowledge. Thirdly, its tricky to do right, but you can bring the danger to your players. Just remember that the only characters that play like half-orc berserkers are half-orc berserkers.

**Don’t make your NPC’s overly powerful**

It can be tempting to make characters that are as gods walking among the player characters but the uniform reaction to characters like these is to run from them or ignore them. This is because the players cannot interact with them favorably.

**Group NPC’s during combat**

All the NPCs already go on my turn you say. How can I group them more than that? Take all the NPC’s of the same type. Have them all act as one unit. Give them joint attacks and such. Give them a shared life pool if they have hitpoints.

**How to make NPCs quickly**

Its very simple. Don’t spend all their experience.

Give them the skills they will need immediately (don’t make them too powerful) and whenever they need a new skill write it down and allocate points to it. The default skills are attack, defend, move, hide, see, lie, detect lies, persuade, and resist persuasion if you’re going for a complete template. Here are some templates for 20exp NPCs:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| guardsman: | |  |
| remaingin exp: | | 5 |
|  |  | level |
| swordsmanship | | 2 |
| blocking |  | 2 |
| running |  | 2 |
| perception | | 2 |
| detect lies | | 2 |
| resist persuasion | | 3 |
| intimidate | | 2 |
|  |  |  |
| flavor |  |  |
| took an arrow to the knee | | |
| has a family | |  |
| bribeable |  |  |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| barkeep: |  |  |
| exp: | 7 |  |
|  |  | level |
| brawling |  | 2 |
| barter |  | 3 |
| detect lies | | 2 |
| resist persuasion | | 3 |
| perception | | 3 |
|  |  |  |
| flavor |  |  |
| fought in the war | |  |
| reputation for kindness | | |

**Recap the last session at the beginning of each session**

A recap is a good way to get things started because it reminds characters where they were at the end of the last session. Either the players or the DM can do the recap. Personally I think the DM doing it works better but either will do so long as it happens.

**Don’t use a BLANK twice**

I am thinking of this mostly with respect to random encounter tables. If they are used enough that the same encounter comes more than once it is time to move on. Make a new table; Reskin them; Do anything other than look lazy because your players will become detached very quickly. That example out of the way this goes for loot table, procedurally generated maps, character names, etc. Beware of random generators.

**Make sure something can happen in each scene**

Make sure than in every scene one character wants something from some other character in that scene. This is something I stole from blood on the snow. The concept is that there is a granter and a petitioner. The petitioner wants something the granter has and the scene is about their interactions. It doesn’t even have to be transferred successfully. The scene just needs to center around these two.

**Adapt your not only your story but your game as well**

Most times the players in your game will like different types of thing. One might like method acting (roleplaying), another might like solving puzzles, and another might like breaking out the figurines and bashing some skulls.

The point is you need to make sure there is something in not just your story but your game for all of your players. If one is sitting there dejected, never doing anything ask him what he liked doing most previously and toss some of that his way.

**Forgo giving explanation**

Imagine this. Your running a campaign with 7 people. two of them chosen at random are absent every week. If you insist on giving explanation for their odd appearances and disappearances in the story that is what the story will be about. In situations like that it is better to just add and remove characters from scenes as needed without explaining it.

**Make a list of names and cross them out as you use them**

Make a list of 10 female and 10 male names that are appropriate for the setting. 10 last names even if youre feeling up to it. As you use them cross them off your list. This does a couple things. First it helps maintain an even population ratio. Second it keeps you from reusing. Third, last, and most important it lets you rattle off the name of any NPC the players encounter.

**Steal ideas from your players**

When your players talk about stuff while making plans they often discuss plot elements out of character. Steal it and put it in your game. it is a easy way to give your players the feeling of bias confirmation.

**Use common sense in your rulings**

There are no rules for many things in this system. Imagine the scenario vividly, draw it if you have to. Think about whether something is plausible or cool. If it either rule in the players favor. Actually just err in their favor unless you have a compelling reason not to. (“no you cannot punch the moon into the earth”)

**Plan out your sessions a bit**

Making a map is a damn good place to start. Making the local government is a good second step. Import locations is a third. NPC’s in those locations. Etc. etc. This helps immensely if you have the time for it.

**End combats early**

Take this situation for example. The players have just hacked their way through an hour long boss fight. They have killed the boss. Unfortunately someone needs to clean up his peons. They can do it but it will take a while because there are so many of them. It may seem inelegant but once a battle becomes a foregone conclusion it becomes a waste of everyone’s time to play it out. Just end the damn thing. Roll one more time, have the players kill all the badguys, deal with any good/bad-stuff and maybe have the players take damage based on the magnitude of failure if any or even the magnitude of badstuff.