**Tabula Rasa**

**A Light-weight General Roleplaying System**

**Written by**

**Harley Dutton**

**Intro**

**Intent:** I wanted to create a role-playing system that could accommodate any character or setting and I wanted it to be easy to learn. Making my audience create their own powers, backgrounds, and lore was an elegant way to do both.

**Required Materials:** Pencils, paper, a pair of dice and the obvious.

**How to Read:** I have done my best to format this using a couple of simple rules. Examples are in italics. Headers are in bold. (maybe headers are underlined and important text is bolded?)(maybe an image with an example of all of my information tier formatting)

**Warning:** Don’t expect this system to be perfectly realistic. I started by trying to make it so but it was impossible and the system suffered for it.

**Thanks:** I would like to thank Nathaniel Bernheim for bearing with me for as long as he has and Stefan Walberg for occasionally giving me useful feedback. Most of all I would like to thank anyone willing to play using my creation.

**Character Creation**

**Group Concept Creation:** This is optional. Everything you do here should be written down such that it cannot be forgotten. Someone at the table, defaulting to the storyteller, picks a setting for the story. Next someone at the table, also defaulting to the storyteller, picks what manner of group the players will be. Each player defines their character’s role within the group and describes a few of their character’s desires. Players then take turns defining their relationships with the other characters or something they want from one of the other characters. Keep going until the group is well connected. After that’s done take turns connecting the characters to important NPCs, events, or locations within the story. This should bind the group together tightly whilst also connecting the group to the larger world of the story. Just remember that bonds of friendship lead to friendship and the opposite is true of enmity.

**Character Points:** Character points are the currency used buy skills and flavor for a character. Each character starts with 10 character points. At the end of each storytelling session each character in the story gets 1 character point.

**Essence Points:** Essence points are used to upgrade skills such that they are better than normal. Each character has a number called essence level keeping track of how many essence points they have bought. The price in character points of an essence point is that character’s essence level. Characters start with 1 essence point and an essence level of 1.

**Skills:** First read the skills section. Go on. I’ll wait. Write down ten things your character can do. Make sure to include things your character is good at, average at, and bad at. Remember to include the basic skills your character will need to function within the story. *Being able to see/hear, talk, move, and think is typically mandatory.* Assign each of these After this is done order this list based on how competent you want your character to be at them. Assign them the levels 12 through 2, 12 being the best and 2 being the worst. Optionally purchase more skills with character points. Any skills you upgrade to special status should be marked so your storyteller can tell which they are. Get your skills approved by your storyteller.

**Flavor:** Same as last time. Go read the Flavor section. Write down a few things that this character owns, has, knows, or is. Each description gives a situational bonus and costs one character point. Upgrade flavor to special flavor for one essence point each. Get your character’s flavor approved by your storyteller.

**Other:** Everything in this section is available to every character and they are not large enough to merit being their own sections.

**Speed:** Speed determines how fast a character is and it allows you to take actions during a conflict. Each point of speed costs an essence point. All characters start with 0 speed.

**Willpower:** Willpower determines how difficult it is to influence a character mentally or socially. A character may clear their head of outside influences for a point of temporary willpower. You may clear your head once per willpower point per day (or so. Subject to change after testing). Each point of willpower costs one essence point.

**Duplicate Flavor:** Treat all functionally identical flavor beyond the first as special flavor and remember that it costs more. *Strength, strength(special), and strength(special). Smart, wise (special), intelligent(special), and knowledgeable(special).*

**Character Sheet:** If you aren’t using printed copy of the character sheet I provide below organize your hand-written character sheet similarly. I organized it the way I did to make it easy for a storyteller to glance at it and get the information they are looking for.

<IMAGE of character sheet GOES HERE>

**SKILLS**

**Definition:** A character’s skills are the things that character can do. Each skill has a name, two numbers (level and experience), and possibly a description associated with it. To qualify as a skill actions taken using the skill must have a chance to fail and do nothing. *Magic allowing a character to breathe underwater would count because the character could fail to cast their spell. Gills would not because it would be silly to assume the character could fail at breathing in this way.*

**New Skills(reword and possibly expand):** At any time that a character possesses CP (character points) and the storyteller approves that character can get a new skill. This skill starts at a level equal to the amount of CP spent on it.

**Skill Names:** The biggest problem with making skill names is that you often must choose between a short name and a descriptive one. Long, descriptive names are a mouthful and can be tricky to fit on a character sheet. Short names are often subject to interpretation and they shouldn’t be because ambiguity causes confusion and potentially fighting. *A skill name like “wind reading” isn’t descriptive enough because it can be interpreted as “reading really fast”, “telling which way the wind is blowing”, “being able to smell really well”, or any number of other things I haven’t thought of.* Of the three examples listed above two of them are not only more descriptive but also overly long. It is tedious to repeatedly rename skills until you find the perfect one so I suggest finding a good one and accompanying it with a verbal description to your group. If they all know what you mean when you talk about a given skill you shouldn’t have any problems.

**Using Skills**: Skills give characters the ability to perform actions. A skill's name indicates what kind of actions it will allow a character to perform and its level indicates how good the character will be at performing those actions.

**Bonuses and Penalties (from flavor also):** Bonuses and penalties modify both the chance to succeed and likely magnitude of success of a skill. Anything that makes a task easier or harder is a bonus or penalty respectively. Additionally, they stack and counteract each other. Typically, each bonus or penalty changes a roll by 1 but something very special could change it by more. The storyteller has final say in arguments arising over bonuses and penalties. *Being attractive and wearing nice clothes is probably worth a bonus of 2 in a social situation. Poor visibility from rain, bad footing from mud, and being outnumbered would give a penalty of 3 in a combat situation. Having the high ground and a weapon whilst making an attack in that same combat situation would be a bonus of 2 which reduces the penalty from 3 to 1.*

**Rolls:** Whenever you want a character to perform an action you must make a skill check for them. The process is as follows:

1. Declare what you want to do and what skill you are using.
2. Add up your bonuses and penalties.
3. Roll 2D6 and compare to skill level. The action succeeds if the skill level is greater than the sum of the dice. To determine how successful an action was, subtract the dice from the skill level.
4. If you succeeded describe exactly how your action occurs but consider your magnitude of success when you do. If you failed someone else gets to describe it; default to the storyteller. This step is optional and it is usually wise to skip it for information gathering actions.

**Special Cases:** Rolling a 2 is a critical success and rolling a 12 is a critical failure. Do not treat these as normal successes and failures. Critical successes should be spectacular—*a mundane persuasion attempt turning into a whirlwind romance—*and critical failures should be catastrophic—*being roughed up and thrown in jail after being caught picking a lock*.

**Experience and Leveling:** Whenever a character passes a skill check that skill gains one experience. When a skill accumulates experience equal to its level it levels up and loses all experience. There is no upper limit on how high a skill’s level can go. It can be a chore to keep track of experience for NPCs’ skills so my advice would be to not. The storyteller can just mess with their levels behind the scenes. *I like to mark the experience for my skills with tally marks e.g. Archery 8 ~~||||~~ || which translates to “archery”, level 8, and 7 experience. After one more successful “archery” roll it should be level 9 with 0 experience.*

**Scope(just make this such that the gm should define the scope at the beginning of the game.):** Skills scope roughly Define good it is. More specifically a skills scope is the number of options it gives a character for dealing with challenges. A skill scope is only a problem if it is too narrow or too broad. Anything in between is fine.

**Too narrow:** Narrow skills are usually made when inexperienced players misunderstand what a skill is supposed to be. They usually long or overly specific names. *For example, "weaving" is a skill of reasonable scope while "wicker basket weaving" is too narrow.* Skills like this are a problem because they are not useful in most situations. *Continuing the earlier example, a character could use "weaving" to weave a miniature with wicker basket under water, a rug, or a shirt but could not use "wicker basket weaving" to weave even a normal rope basket.* Skills that are too narrow just aren’t usable in many situations which will leave a character powerless and a player bored if they have too many of them.

**Too broad (IS THIS TOO RANTY?):** Broad skills are typically vague or ambiguous. They are more difficult to catch and ultimately more damaging to a story. Skills that are too broad in scope give a character far too many options. Worst case, one character trivializes all the challenges the Storyteller places before the group and everyone wonders why they even bothered making characters. Best case the Storyteller escalates everything happening in the story to match power level of this character, the rest of the players get left in the dust, and end up wondering why they even bothered making characters. *The skill "magic" is a good example of this. If a group of orcs attacks the group the character with "magic" uses fire and lightning to kill them all. If something nigh impossible to kill like a dragon attacks the group they teleport everyone to safety. If a NPC is being uncooperative they use mind control. This makes the other players in the group inconsequential. If the storyteller escalates these situations by say, sending more orcs, making the dragon follow them, or making the NPC a wandering god incapable of being influenced, it makes the encounter so challenging that the rest of the group cannot interact with it and must instead watch, bored, as the player with "magic" does everything for them.* Remove skills, but not necessarily characters, from the story painlessly or otherwise.

**Sanity:** As a storyteller, it will be difficult to keep a bunch of skills your players have made up straight much less all the skills you have made for all of your NPCs. My advice is to standardize things a bit. Ask players with functionally identical skills to rename them such that they are identical. Furthermore ask players to use the same general naming conventions. Names that end in “ing” are usually safe. Swordfighting, fishing, blah blah blah. Marksmanship, persuasion, and intimidation are also good. Words that end in “ation” also work I think. What about words that end in “asion”?

**Common skills:** There are skills that every character should have. They change from story to story but it’s a safe bet that all characters will need a method of communicating with the other characters, gathering information about the world through their senses. Moving about is another common one but is frequently waived as the level of this skill or whether it can be done never come into question. Logic/reasoning might be another common skill but it is commonly left to the players to interpret the clues you give them.

**Special skills:** These cost an essence point in addition to the normal cost of a new skill. They are for skills that the storyteller has decided are overly powerful or broad. Most magics fall under this category.

**Flavor**

**Definition:** Flavor describes anything a character knows, owns, has, or is. Its purpose is to differentiate characters from each other and make them more interesting. Each piece of a character's flavor is a description of an aspect of that character and nothing more. The definitions for skills and flavor overlap in places. *For example, "seeing in the dark" could be either a skill or a piece of flavor.* When this happens pick which it will be. This choice is subject to storyteller veto.

**New Flavor:** A character can get new flavor any time the storyteller approves and the character has a CP (character point) to spend. The same goes for special flavor but it costs an EP (essence point) in addition to the normal price of one CP. Flavor and even special flavor can be obtained through roleplaying. This is obviously at storyteller discretion.

**Special Flavor:** Flavor defines a character with many small descriptions. Making a piece of flavor special highlights it as one of the most important of those descriptions. Typically, things that are unique, expensive, or magical end up being special flavor rather than normal flavor.

**Effect:** Aside from making a character more interesting flavor also gives small statistical bonuses and penalties. Whenever a character makes a role they should check their flavor list. The character gets a bonus or penalty of 1 for each applicable piece of flavor. Special flavor can give a bonus or penalty larger than 1.

**Examples:** These are some examples of flavor. Some are normal, some are special, some are bad. *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 to me. 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.*

**Conflict**

**Definition:** Conflict is a disagreement between two parties within the story. This section describes how to resolve such disagreements. In conflicts characters can inflict flavor upon each other. Bad flavor obtained in combat usually takes the form of cuts, bruises, and severed limbs. Bad flavor obtained from social or mental conflicts could be a sudden desire to help your enemies, a bad headache, memory loss, or any number of other things.

**Timing:** In time-sensitive conflicts it becomes necessary to use rounds, turns, speed points, and actions. Characters can take actions to do stuff during a round. A round is an inexact unit of time used to organize the conflict. Every round, each character gets speed points and uses them to pay for actions. Characters take turns making actions, restarting the round when necessary, until the conflict is resolved.

**Rounds, Turns, and Speed Points:** Begin each round by giving each character speed points equal to their speed rating. At storyteller discretion characters who enter a conflict from stealth get additional speed points for the round. The character with the most speed points takes the first turn. Continue taking turns clockwise or counterclockwise until all characters in the conflict have run out of speed points at which point the round ends. Between rounds characters may enter or leave the conflict and characters may spend willpower to DEFINE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU SPEND WILLPOWER.

**Actions:** Absolutely anything a character does in a timed conflict is considered an action. Attacking, defending, moving, talking, looking, hearing, entering or leaving stealth, resting, crafting and doing magic are the common ones. Actions can be combined for increased effect if the character can pay the individual parts of the action. Actions can be taken on-turn and off-turn. Off-turn actions always cost more.

**Attack:** Any action that could result in giving another character bad flavor from either of the damage or influence tables counts as an attack. Attacks cost 1 speed point on-turn. Attacks cost 2 speed points off-turn and can only be made along with a defend action. ARE COUNTER-ATTACK CHAINS A PROBLEM?

**Defend:** Any action that could result in a character avoiding bad flavor or defending another character from bad flavor counts as a defend action. Defend actions cannot be performed on-turn and cost 1 speed point off-turn.

**Move:** Any action resulting in a character moving in a meaningful but reasonable manner is considered a move action. Moves cost 0 speed points on-turn. Moves cost 1 speed point off-turn and can only be made along with a defend action.

**Double Recipients:** You can cumulatively double the maximum number of characters affected by an attack action at the cost of 1 speed point on-turn and 2 speed points off-turn. This is subject to a “Does this make sense?” check. If successful give all of them the same bad flavor.

**Other:** Other actions cost 1 speed point on-turn. Other actions cannot be performed off-turn. *Common “other” actions include entering stealth, crafting, resting, and any magic action that is not a move, attack, or defend.*

**Free:** Free action cost 0 speed points both on-turn and off-turn. *Talking, looking, and hearing are the most common free actions.*

**PROBABLY REORGANIZE EVERYTHING BELOW HERE.**

**Bad Flavor:** First off, bad flavor is bad in the sense that no reasonable person would want it. Whenever a character succeeds at an attack action they give another character bad flavor from the damage table, the influence table, or a combination thereof. Each entry in these tables has a number value. The total value of the bad flavor must be less than or equal to the magnitude of success of the attack roll.

**Damage Table: IMAGE HERE. If it is not obvious what the duration is (google how long \_\_\_\_\_\_ takes to heal) state it. Also some are permanent.**

**Influence Table: IMAGE HERE. These should all have durations I think?**

For making these tables cost should be related to duration and how debilitating a piece of flavor is.

**DTMS check for new bad flavor**: All inflicted flavor is subject to a DTMS check. Cant seduce lesbians. Cant cut off arms with a mace.

**Character death:** characters die when they are unplayable, when they should die based on their flavor, or when a player throws in the towel.

**Willpower:** I added willpower to the system because both as a player and a storyteller I was afraid of skills similar to “mind control” screwing up my plans. In time-sensitive conflicts characters can spend a point of willpower to (temporarily?) get rid of (all of the/a piece of) their bad flavor stemming from the influence table. When timing doesn’t matter this panacea should kick in at the most dramatic moment possible.