Bonus, Penalty and Pushed Rolls

With the 7th edition of Call of Cthulhu firmly upon us I wanted to take some time to discuss bonus, penalty and pushed rolls under the new system. If you haven’t picked up a copy of the 7th edition, you probably should, but its gonna cost ya. You can, however, checkout the quick start PDF that is free <HERE>. I do not yet own a copy of the 7th edition book but I do have the full PDF version. The trouble with getting a PDF before the physical copy is that you have the content in hand and it makes it harder to spend the money of the physical copy if your on a budget like myself. Nonetheless, the 7th edition keepers guide is beautiful, the investigators handbook is as well but if you are only looking to get the rules you wont need to pick that up. The investigators handbook does have lots of great information dealing with the creation, customization and playing of your character. Again, this is a top notch book and <Chaosium Inc.> has done a great job on these. Add in the keepers screen and the field guide and your sitting pretty. For those of you who are new, you may not want to drop money just for the sake of owning the books. In this case the free PDF will get you playing the game and if you want to buy the more in depth PDFs those are available as well for a lower cost than the physical books. Call of Cthulhu is less about rules than it is about story so if you get the quick start guide and some free auto calculating character sheets, also available at <Chaosium Inc.> you will be set. Now your on your way to the eldrich horrors of the Mythos, beware.

Now that we are set to play the game I wanted to discuss one piece, which is new in the 7th edition. In the 7th edition we have the concept of the difficulty level of a roll. The rolls can be regular, hard or extreme. This is a very simple concept to grasp initially and it really makes the system more dynamic in my opinion. So and extreme roll is one-fifth of your total in any given skill. If you have 80% chance at doing something, divide that by five, and you get 16, you have a 16% chance of rolling an extreme roll for that skill. Roll under 16 and you have seriously nailed it. We used to call this impaling because the combat rules had this concept for getting an impale when attacking with a weapon that had a chance to do so. Saying you impaled your accounting roll though is a bit strange, now we can say we got an extreme success on our accounting roll, which makes more sense. Half of your initial skill is now called a hard success. Again, 80% skill, divide that by 2, you now have 40% chance for a hard success. Roll less than 40 but above 16 and your have your self a hard success. Good job. Anything that is above 40% but below 80% is a normal success and of course anything above 80% is a fail.

This ranked system is great because it does away with the resistance table from previous editions. I never had any issue with the resistance table but it did require a bit of math in your head or a quick look at the table itself to figure things out. Easy enough but under the new system it is dead simple. An extreme beats a hard beats a regular, and that is that. Failure is failure so no trouble there. If you are doing an opposed roll simple roll for both opponents and see who gets the higher roll. If you both have the same level, hard for example, go with the best roll of the two. Lets say, Mr. Corbitt is trying to dominate a player, he needs to oppose the players POW. Corbitt’s POW is 80 and the players is 65. So they both roll a hard success. Corbitt needing fewer than 40 for his hard success gets a 36, not bad. The player needs under 32 (I round down) and rolls a 20. Now Corbitt got a hard success by 4 and the player got a hard success by 12. The player opposes the spell in this case and feels a bit of a tingle on the back of his neck, but is not dominated by Corbitt. Whew that was close. This also gives the Keeper the ability to ask for specific levels of success according to the difficulty of the task. If you are trying to pick the lock on a door in the dead of night with no one around, you need a normal success, if you try to do the same while bullets are flying and the other investigators are screaming for you to hurry up, lets call that a hard success.

So now we have recapped some basics on how rolls work in 7th edition but that was not the intention of this article, here we are discussing bonus, penalty and pushed rolls, so lets let the fun begin. We will start with bonus rolls. These are rolls that allow the person making the roll to add 1 or 2 bonus die to the roll depending on the level of bonus. Let’s set this up, so we have an investigator attempting a jump from a moving car to the bed of a moving truck. OK, not advisable but hey I’m not going to judge. So in a normal case I would give this investigator a penalty because the vehicles are moving. Wait though this particular investigator was a circus performer who worked doing stunts on moving horses. OK well, for this investigator I am going to give one bonus die for this jump because it is actually not as difficult as jumping from one moving horse to another, which is old hat for them. So a bonus die is simply a second die roll for the tens place of a d100. Here is an example, our circus performer has a 60% in their jump skill, so they roll a d100 which is a tens die and a ones die, they get 30 for the tens and a 6 for the ones. Great 36 that works, but lets roll that bonus die and see what we get. So we roll the tens die again, now we get a 00, oh boy we have a 6 and that is an extreme success. So we will take the roll with the lower score because of our bonus. Extreme, wonderful, the investigator jumps to the truck without any problems and because of the extreme success I will give them an extra move once they get there, and tell them they basically moon walked through the air and landed on bended knee like Batman. If the investigator had rolled something higher on the bonus die like lets say a 70, we would then just take the 36 instead. Now if we had a bonus of 2 we would do the same, but roll 2 tens die and take the lowest of the 3 tens that we rolled, the initial ten and the two bonus ones. Not too hard right, I like the idea of bonus die as it gives the keeper extra flexibility in the difficulty levels of rolls.

So now lets say the investigator is trying to do something exceptionally difficult, and on top of that there is a condition that requires a penalty be in place. Oh my, this is going to be disastrous, and fun. This is from an actual game I played with my group just a few weeks ago. So we have an investigator on the rooftop with a rifle keeping an eye on the drop site. The mark picked up the drop and moved down the alley in the direction the group did not want him to go. Moreover, the mark entered the building to the opposite of the investigator on the roof. So, like a good lunatic the investigator, he quickly locates a power line running between the two buildings. He attempts to high wire walk across to the other building. OK, we have the setup. I was going to make him give a hard DEX roll to get across. He was pretty banged up from a previous encounter and so had an injured leg. The injury gave him one penalty die on his roll. With a DEX of 70 he needed to roll 35 or under for a hard success. In addition to that he has one penalty die. He makes his first roll 20 on the tens and 4 on the ones for a 24. Not bad, that should do it, but wait; there is a penalty on this roll. He rolls the tens die again, this time getting a 40, giving him 44. Since it is a penalty he has to take the higher roll. Which fails the hard success, but since he was sill in a normal success I gave him a luck roll so that he didn’t plummet to his death. Again the same would be true for a penalty of 2 you would just roll the 2 penalty die and take the highest of the three. If you were worried about our wire-walking investigator have no fear. He made a series of bad rolls followed by successful luck rolls. He didn’t die but was seriously injured by the time he got to the ground to chase the mark. The mark was a zombie and fire vampires were sent after our hero as well. The whole thing ended with a building on fire and our investigators melting into the spectating crowd then slipping down the street and back to their hotel.

OK, we have covered bonus and penalty rolls so now lets get to the real good stuff, the pushed roll. Pushing a roll is basically explaining how you would try again with a different approach and re-rolling. The down side is that the keeper gets to come up with a more dire consequence if the roll is failed. This can make for some really fun moments in a game, that all the players can enjoy. So we have some action being performed, lets say an investigator is trying to look at a folder on the police sergeant’s desk when he leaves the room. No problem, depending how the keeper would want to play it, the player could make either a stealth or slight of hand roll. The player rolls and fails the roll. Now they indicate they would like to push the roll. The keeper asks how they intend to push it. The player says she will act as if she spilled her coffee and attempt to clean it up, looking at the file as she does. OK, says the Keeper make another roll. If the roll is a success then the Keeper can tell the investigator what she finds. If she fails again, well, she not only gets caught looking at the file but she also spills coffee all over the sergeant’s half finished paperwork and is now in for an unceremonious escort to the sidewalk. Not only do they investigators not get any further chance to get info from the police station, the next time we encounter Sargent Coffee Stain, he will be less than cooperative.

So we can see that the addition of bonus, penalty and pushed rolls have given much more flexibility to the mechanics. I enjoy these new additions quite a bit and I hope you do to. Bonus and penalty die help to make rolling skills much more flexible than they were in the past. I think most Keepers probably had some form of this already but it is nice to have it clarified in the rules. No more failing simple tasks because your skill is abysmal. A few bonus die for a simple yet skilled task can help you there. No more success where the task is near impossible because of your god like skill. A few penalty die and even our expert marksman will miss now and again. Finally, my favorite, pushing a roll, you can certainly get a re-try on that, as long as you give me a good reason and are willing to pay the price for a failure. With these additions I think the good folks at Chaosium and really enhanced the game in a way that added to the fun and ease of playing that I have always loved about this game. Kudos and hats off to you all, now get out there and start pushing rolls people, you only live once, or in our case as many times as you need to complete the scenario.