CYPHER SYSTEM RULES PRIMER

CYPHER SYSTEM™

Compatible with the original Cypher System Rulebook
and the upcoming revised Cypher System Rulebook

HOW TO PLAY THE CYPHER SYSTEM

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The Cypher System is a game that is played in the joint imagination of all the players, including the GM. The GM sets the scene, the players state what their characters attempt to do, and the GM determines what happens next. One scene logically flows to the next—you might start in a town, travel across the wilderness, and eventually end up at the site of an ancient ruin—and before you know it, you've got a story as compelling as any you've read or watched. The rules and the dice help make the game run smoothly, but it's the people, not the rules or the dice, that direct the action and determine the story—and the fun. If a rule gets in the way or detracts from the game, the players and the GM should work together to change it.

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

This is how you play the Cypher System:

1. The player tells the GM what they want to do. This is a *character action*.

2. The GM determines if there's a chance of failure or if that action is routine (and therefore works without needing a roll).

3. If there is a chance of failure, the GM determines which stat the task uses (Might, Speed, or Intellect) and the task's *difficulty*—how hard it will be on a scale from 1 (really easy) to 10 (basically impossible).

4. The player and the GM determine if anything about the character—such as training, equipment, special abilities, or various actions—can modify the difficulty up or down by one or more steps. If these *modifications* reduce the difficulty to less than 1, the action is routine (and therefore works with no roll needed).

5. If the action still isn't routine, the GM uses its difficulty to determine the *target number*—how high the player must roll to succeed at the action (see the Task Difficulty table, page 3). **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. The GM doesn't have to tell the player what the target number is, but can give a hint, especially if the character would reasonably know if the action was easy, average, difficult, or impossible.

6. The player rolls a d20. If the roll is equal to or higher than the target number, the character succeeds.

That's it. That's how to do anything, whether it's identifying a strange device, calming a raging drunk, climbing a treacherous cliff, or battling a savage alien. Even if you ignored all the other rules, you could still play the Cypher System with just this information.

The key features here are: character actions, determining task difficulty, and determining modifications.

TAKING ACTION

Each character gets one turn each round. On a character's turn, they can do one thing—an action. All actions fall into one of three categories: Might, Speed, or Intellect (just like the three stats). Many actions require die rolls (rolling a d20).

Every action performs a task, and every task has a difficulty that determines what number a character must reach or surpass with a die roll to succeed. Most tasks have a difficulty of 0, which means the character succeeds automatically. For example, walking across a room, opening a door, picking something off the floor, and throwing a stone into a nearby bucket are all actions, but none of them require a roll. Actions that are usually difficult or that become difficult due to the situation (such as shooting at a target in a blizzard) have a higher difficulty. These actions usually require a roll.

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 a battleaxe 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 laser gun 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 skills, 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, page 8).

DETERMINING TASK STAT

Every task relates to one of a character's three stats: Might, Speed, or Intellect. Physical activities that require strength, power, or endurance relate to Might. Physical activities that require agility, flexibility, or fast reflexes relate to Speed. Mental activities that require force of will, memory, or mental power relate to Intellect. This means you can generalize all tasks into three categories: Might tasks, Speed tasks, and Intellect tasks. You can also generalize rolls into three categories: Might rolls, Speed rolls, and Intellect rolls. The category of the task or roll determines what kind of Effort you can apply to the roll.

DETERMINING TASK DIFFICULTY

The most frequent thing a GM does during the game—and probably the most important thing—is setting a task's difficulty. To make the job easier, use the Task Difficulty table, which associates difficulty rating with a descriptive name, a target number, and general guidance about the difficulty.

Every difficulty from 1 to 10 has a target number associated with it. The target number is easy to remember: it's always three times the difficulty. The target number is the minimum number a player needs to roll on a d20 to succeed at the task. Moving down the table means the task is more difficult, moving up means it is less difficult.

TASK DIFFICULTY

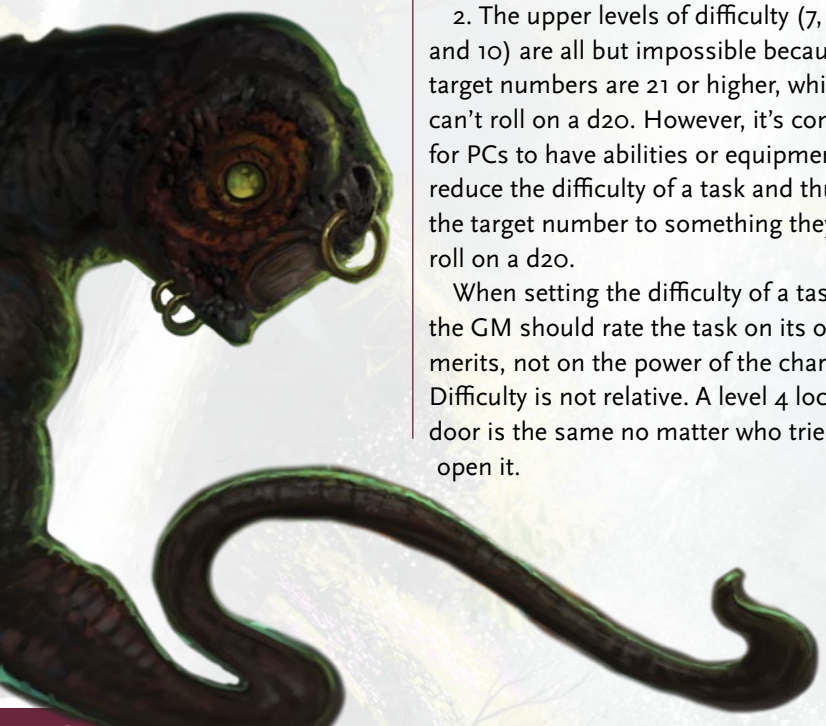
Task Difficulty	Description	Target No.	Guidance
0	Routine	0	Anyone can do this basically every time.
1	Simple	3	Most people can do this most of the time.
2	Standard	6	Typical task requiring focus, but most people can usually do this.
3	Demanding	9	Requires full attention; most people have a 50/50 chance 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).

Modifiers affect the difficulty rather than the player's roll. This has two consequences:

1. Low target numbers such as 3 or 6, which would be boring in most games that use a d20, are not boring in the Cypher System. For example, if you need to roll a 6 or higher, you still have a 25% chance to fail.

2. The upper levels of difficulty (7, 8, 9, and 10) are all but impossible because the target numbers are 21 or higher, which you can't roll on a d20. However, it's common for PCs to have abilities or equipment that reduce the difficulty of a task and thus lower the target number to something they *can* roll on a d20.

When setting the difficulty of a task, the GM should rate the task on its own merits, not on the power of the characters. Difficulty is not relative. A level 4 locked door is the same no matter who tries to open it.



MODIFYING DIFFICULTY

Character skills, favorable circumstances, or excellent equipment can make a task easier. For example, if a character is trained in climbing, it turns a difficulty 6 climb into a difficulty 5 climb. This is called "*easing* the task." If the character is specialized in climbing, it turns a difficulty 6 climb into a difficulty 4 climb. This is called "easing the task 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 ease that task by one step. If you are specialized, you ease it by two steps. A skill can never ease a task by more than two steps.

Anything else that eases tasks (help from an ally, a particular piece of equipment, or some other advantage) is referred to as an *asset*. Assets can never ease a task by more than two steps.

You can also ease a given task by applying Effort. This costs 3 points from the relevant stat Pool, minus any Edge. Using Effort eases the task by one step. (At higher tiers, characters can apply additional Effort, each of which costs 2 points from the relevant stat Pool and eases the task by an additional step.)

To sum up, three things can ease a task: skills, assets, and Effort. If you can ease a task's difficulty to 0 using one or more of these, you automatically succeed and don't need to make a roll.

If something makes a task harder (like fighting on a slippery floor), it *hinders* the task by one or more steps. Hindering is the opposite of easing.

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.

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 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 sturdy leather jerkin or chainmail) or from special abilities. Like weapon damage, Armor is a flat number, not a roll. If you're attacked, subtract your Armor from the damage you take. For example, a leather jerkin gives you 1 point of Armor, meaning that you take 1 less point of damage from attacks. If a bandit hits you with a knife for 2 points of damage while you're wearing a leather jerkin, 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.

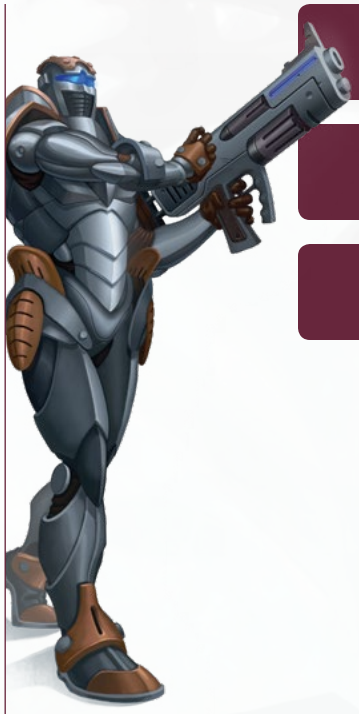
When you see the word "Armor" capitalized in the game rules (other than as the name of a special ability), it refers to your Armor characteristic—the number you subtract from incoming damage. When you see the word "armor" with a lowercase "a," it refers to any physical armor you might wear.

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

LIGHT WEAPONS inflict only 2 points of damage, but they ease the attack roll by one step because they are fast and easy to use. Light weapons are punches, kicks, clubs, knives, handaxes, rapiers, 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, 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, and so on. Anything that must be used in two hands is a heavy weapon.



Wearing physical armor increases the cost of using a level of Effort when attempting a Speed-based action (+1 for light armor, +2 for medium, +3 for heavy). Training reduces this cost. Wearing armor you're not trained in increases the cost.

ATTACK MODIFIERS AND SPECIAL SITUATIONS

In combat situations, many modifiers might come into play. The GM is at liberty to assess whatever modifiers they think are appropriate to the situation (that's their role in the game). Often the modifier eases or hinders the task. So if a situation makes it harder to attack, when a PC attacks a nonplayer character (NPC), their attack is hindered, and when an NPC attacks a PC, their defense roll is eased. This is because players make all rolls, whether they are attacking or defending—NPCs never make attack or defense rolls.

When in doubt, if it seems like it should be harder to attack in a situation, hinder the attack rolls by one step. If it seems like attacks should gain an advantage or be easier in some way, ease the attack rolls by one step.

DEALING AND SUFFERING DAMAGE

When an attack strikes a character, it usually means the character takes damage.

An attack against a PC subtracts points from one of the character's stat Pools—usually the Might Pool. Whenever an attack simply says it deals "damage" without specifying the type, it means Might damage, which is by far the most common type. Intellect damage, which is usually the result of a mental attack, is always labeled as Intellect damage. Speed damage is often a physical attack, but attacks that deal Speed damage are fairly rare.

NPCs don't have stat Pools. Instead, they have a characteristic called *health*. When an NPC takes damage of any kind, the amount is subtracted from its health. Unless described otherwise, an NPC's health is always equal to its target number. Some NPCs might have special reactions to or defenses against attacks that would normally deal Speed damage or Intellect damage, but unless the NPC's description specifically explains this, assume that all damage is subtracted from the NPC's health.

Objects have an object damage track instead of health: intact, minor damage (level reduced by 1), major damage (broken but can be repaired), and destroyed (ruined and can't be repaired).

As mentioned previously, damage is always a specific amount determined by the attack. For example, a slash with a broadsword deals 4 points of damage. An Adept's Onslaught force blast deals 4 points of damage. Often, there are ways for the attacker to increase the damage. For example, a PC can apply Effort to deal 3 additional points of damage, and rolling a natural 17 on the attack roll deals 1 additional point of damage.

AMBIENT DAMAGE

Some kinds of damage aren't direct attacks against a creature, but they indirectly affect everything in the area. Most of these are environmental effects such as winter cold,

THE DAMAGE TRACK

Hale is the normal state for a character: all three stat Pools are at 1 or higher, and the PC has no penalties from harmful conditions. When a hale PC takes enough damage to reduce one of their stat Pools to 0, they become impaired. Note that a character whose stat Pools are much lower than normal can still be hale.

Impaired is a wounded or injured state. When an impaired character applies Effort, it costs 1 extra point per level applied. For example, applying one level of Effort costs 4 points instead of 3, and applying two levels of Effort costs 7 points instead of 5.

An impaired character ignores minor and major effect results on their rolls and doesn't deal as much extra damage in combat with a special roll.

When an impaired PC takes enough damage to reduce one of their stat Pools to 0, they become debilitated.

Debilitated is a critically injured state. A debilitated character may not take any actions other than to move (probably crawl) no more than an immediate distance. If a debilitated character's Speed Pool is 0, they can't move at all.

When a debilitated PC takes enough damage to reduce a stat Pool to 0, they are dead.

Dead is dead.

high temperatures, or background radiation. Damage from these kinds of sources is called ambient damage. Physical armor usually doesn't protect against ambient damage, though a well-insulated suit of armor can protect against cold weather.

THE EFFECTS OF TAKING DAMAGE

When an NPC reaches 0 health, it is either dead or (if the attacker wishes it) incapacitated, meaning unconscious or beaten into submission.

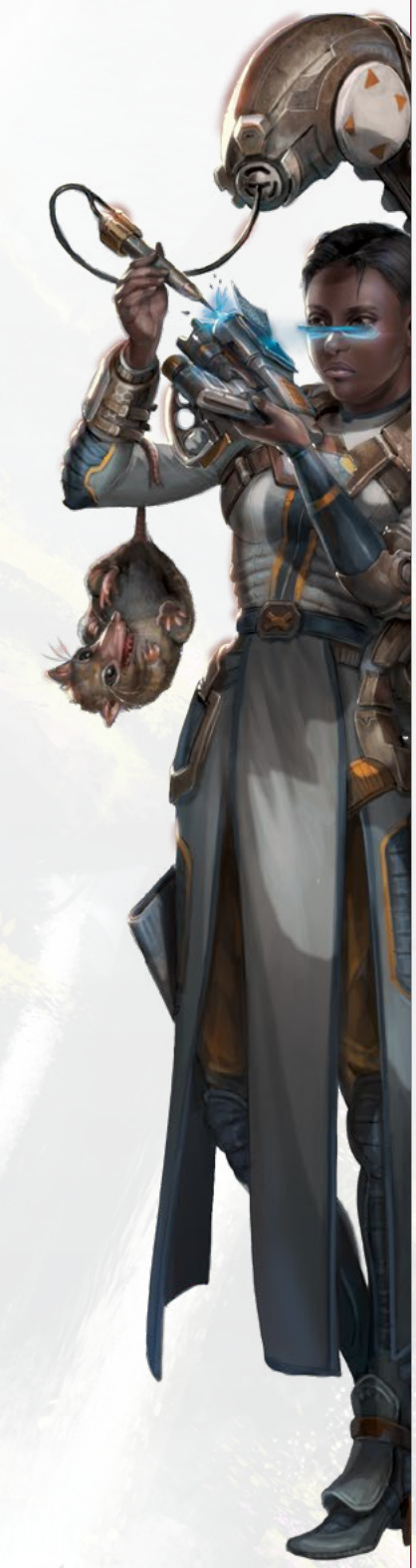
As previously mentioned, damage from most sources is applied to a character's Might Pool. Otherwise, stat damage always reduces the Pool of the stat it affects.

If damage reduces a character's stat Pool to 0, any further damage to that stat (including excess damage from the attack that reduced the stat to 0) is applied to another stat Pool. Damage is applied to Pools in this order:

1. Might Pool (unless the Pool is 0)
2. Speed Pool (unless the Pool is 0)
3. Intellect Pool

Even if the damage is applied to another stat Pool, it still counts as its original type for the purpose of Armor and special abilities that affect damage. For example, if a Warrior with 2 Armor is reduced to 0 Might and then is hit by a monster's claw for 3 points of damage, it still counts as Might damage, so their 2 Armor reduces the damage to 1 point, which then is applied to their Speed Pool. In other words, even though the Warrior takes the damage from their Speed Pool, it doesn't ignore Armor like Speed damage normally would.

In addition to taking damage from their Might Pool, Speed Pool, or Intellect Pool, PCs also have a *damage track*. The damage track has four states (from best to worst): hale, impaired, debilitated, and dead. When one of a PC's stat Pools reaches 0, the character moves one step down the damage track. Thus, if they are hale, they become impaired. If they are already impaired, they become debilitated. If they are already debilitated, they become dead.



Some effects can immediately shift a PC one or more steps on the damage track. These include rare poisons, cellular disruption attacks, and massive traumas (such as falls from very great heights, being run over by a speeding vehicle, and so on, as determined by the GM).

Some attacks, like venom from a serpent's bite, an Adept's Stasis ability, or the paralytic saliva of a ghoul, have effects other than damage to a stat Pool or shifting the PC on the damage track. These attacks can cause unconsciousness, paralysis, and so on.

RECOVERING POINTS IN A POOL

After losing or spending points in a Pool, you recover those points by resting. You can't increase a Pool past its maximum by resting—just back to its normal level. Any extra points gained go away with no effect. The amount of points you recover from a rest, and how long each rest takes, depends on how many times you have rested so far that day.

When you rest, make a *recovery roll*. To do this, roll 1d6 + 1. You recover that many points, and you can divide them among your stat Pools however you wish. For example, if your recovery roll is 4 and you've lost 4 points of Might and 2 points of Speed, you can recover 4 points of Might, or 2 points of Might and 2 points of Speed, or any other combination adding up to 4 points.

The first time you rest each day, it takes only a few seconds to catch your breath. If you rest this way in the middle of an encounter, it takes one action on your turn.

The second time you rest each day, you must rest ten minutes to make a recovery roll. The third time you rest each day, you must rest one hour to make a recovery roll. The fourth time you rest each day, you must rest ten hours to make a recovery roll (usually, this occurs when you sleep).

After that much rest, it's assumed to be a new day, so the next time you rest, it takes only a few seconds. The next rest takes ten minutes, then one hour, and so on, in a cycle.

If you haven't rested yet that day and you take a lot of damage in a fight, you could rest a few seconds (regaining 1d6 points + 1) and then immediately rest for ten minutes (regaining another 1d6 points + 1). Thus, in one full day of doing nothing but resting, you could recover 4d6 points + 4.

Each character chooses when to make recovery rolls. If a party of five explorers rests for ten minutes because two members want to make recovery rolls, the other characters don't have to make rolls at that time. Later in the day, those three can decide to rest for ten minutes and make recovery rolls.

Recovery Roll	Rest Time Needed
First recovery roll	One action
Second recovery roll	Ten minutes
Third recovery roll	One hour
Fourth recovery roll	Ten hours

Using points from a recovery roll to raise a stat Pool from 0 to 1 or higher also automatically moves the character up one step on the damage track.

If all of a PC's stat Pools are above 0 and the character has taken special damage that moved them down the damage track, they can use a recovery roll to move up one step on the damage track instead of recovering points. For example, a Warrior who is debilitated from a hit with a laser gun can rest and move up to impaired rather than recover points in a Pool.

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 them, 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 them 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 them, 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 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. This is called a GM intrusion.

1: Intrusion. The GM makes a free intrusion (see below) and doesn't award experience points (XP) for it.

17: Damage Bonus. If the roll was an attack, it deals 1 additional point of damage.

18: Damage Bonus. If the roll was an attack, it deals 2 additional points of damage.

19: Minor Effect. If the roll was an attack, it deals 3 additional points of damage. If the roll was something other than an attack, the PC gets a minor effect in addition to the normal results of the task.

20: Major Effect. If the roll was an attack, it deals 4 additional points of damage. If the roll was something other than an attack, the PC gets a major effect in addition to the normal results of the task. If the PC spent points from a stat Pool on the action, the point cost for the action decreases to 0, meaning the character regains those points as if they had not been spent at all.

PLAYER INTRUSION
A player intrusion occurs when a player spends 1 XP to introduce a change to the world or current circumstances that makes things easier for a PC. Using an intrusion does not require a character to use an action to trigger it, it just happens.

Examples include:

Weapon Break: *Your foe's weapon has a weak spot; it becomes damaged and moves two steps down the object damage track.*

Convenient Idea: *A flash of insight provides you with a clear answer or suggests a course of action about an urgent question, problem, or obstacle you're facing.*

Fortuitous Malfunction: *A trap or a dangerous device malfunctions before it can affect you.*

Friendly NPC: *An NPC you don't know chooses to help you, though doesn't necessarily explain why. Maybe they'll ask you for a favor in return afterward, depending on how much trouble they go to.*

GM INTRUSION

GM intrusion reflects when something in the story occurs to complicate the character's life. The character hasn't necessarily fumbled or done anything wrong (although perhaps they did). It could just be that the task presents an unexpected difficulty or something unrelated affects the current situation.

At any time, the GM can introduce an unexpected complication for a character. For example, an enemy might appear and attack, the rope the character is climbing might snap, or an unstable floor might give out beneath a character's feet. A GM intrusion always puts the spotlight on that one character, and when the GM finishes explaining what the sudden, surprising turn of events is, they ask that player, "Now what do you do?" The player must deal with this new complication.

When the GM intrudes in this manner, they must give the affected character 2 XP. That 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).

As a general rule, the GM should intrude *at least* once each session but probably no more than once or twice each session per character.

Anytime the GM intrudes, the player can spend 1 XP to refuse the intrusion, though that also means they don't get the 2 XP. If the player has no XP to spend, they can't refuse the intrusion.

Example Intrusion: Through skill and the aid of another character, a PC eases a wall-climbing task from difficulty 2 to difficulty 0. Normally, they would succeed at the task automatically, but the GM intrudes and says, "No, a bit of the crumbling wall gives way, so you still have to make a roll." As with any difficulty 2 task, the target number is 6. The PC attempts the roll as normal, and because the GM intruded, the character gains 2 XP. The PC immediately gives one of those XP to another player.

Another Example Intrusion: During a fight, a PC swings their axe and damages a foe with a slice across the shoulder. The GM

HELPING

If a character attempts a task and gets help from another character, the acting character's task is eased. The helping character uses their action to provide this help. If the helper is trained or specialized in that task, the task is eased by an additional step. For example, if Sally the Warrior is trying to climb a steep incline but has no skill at climbing, and Duvian the Explorer (who is trained in climbing) spends his turn helping her, Sally's climb is eased by two steps. A character with an inability in a task cannot help another character with that task—the character with the inability provides no benefit in that situation. Help counts as an asset.

intrudes by saying that the foe turned just as the axe struck, wrenching the weapon from the character's grip and sending it clattering across the floor. The axe comes to a stop 10 feet (3 m) away. Because the GM intruded, the PC gains 2 XP, and they immediately give one of those XP to another player. Now the character must deal with the dropped weapon, perhaps drawing a different weapon or using their next turn to scramble after the axe.

If a character rolls a 1 on a die, the GM can intrude without giving the character any XP. This kind of intrusion can happen immediately or very soon thereafter.

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.

VERY LONG DISTANCE is anything greater than long distance but less than 500 feet (150 m) or so. Beyond that range, distances are always specified—1,000 feet (300 m), a mile (1.5 km), and so on.

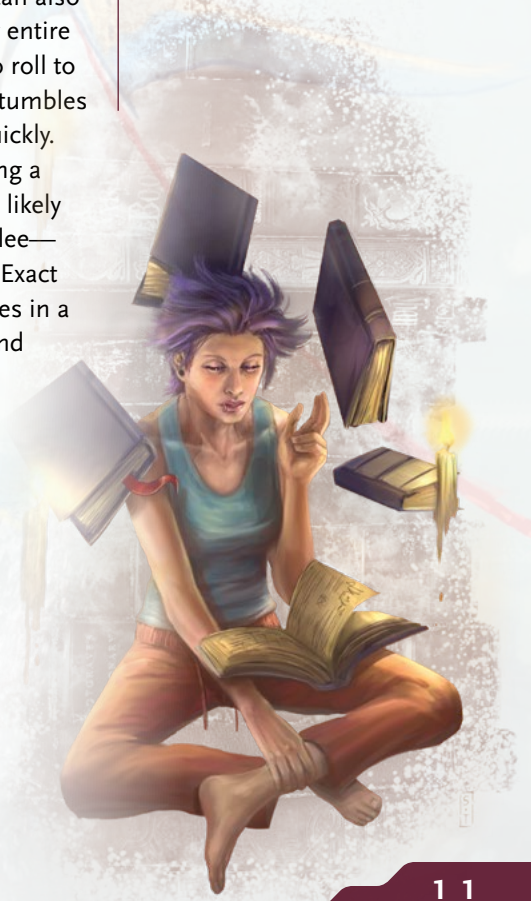
The idea is that it's not necessary to measure precise distances. Immediate distance is right there, practically next to the character. Short distance is nearby. Very long distance is really far off.

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 of you. 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, they can take a few steps over to the control panel and activate a switch. They can lunge across a small room to attack a foe. They can open a door and step through.

A character can move a short distance as their entire action for a turn. They can also try to move a long distance as their 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 goblins, any character can likely attack any goblin 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 goblin stayed back to use its bow, a character might have to use their entire action to move the short distance required to attack that foe. It doesn't matter if the goblin is 20 feet (6 m) or 40 feet (12 m) away—it's simply considered short distance. It does matter if the goblin is more than 50 feet (15 m) away because that distance would require a long move.



ENCOUNTERS, ROUNDS, AND INITIATIVE

Sometimes in the course of the game, the GM or players will refer to an *encounter*. Encounters are not so much measurements of time as they are events or instances in which something happens, like a scene of a movie or a chapter in a book. An encounter might be a fight with a foe, a dramatic crossing of a raging river, or a stressful negotiation with an important official. It's useful to use the word when referring to a specific scene, as in "My Might Pool is low after that encounter with the tyrannosaurus rex yesterday."

A *round* is about five to ten seconds. The length of time is variable because sometimes one round might be a bit longer than another. You don't need to measure time more precisely than that. You can estimate that on average there are about ten rounds in a minute. In a round, everyone—each character and NPC—gets to take one action.

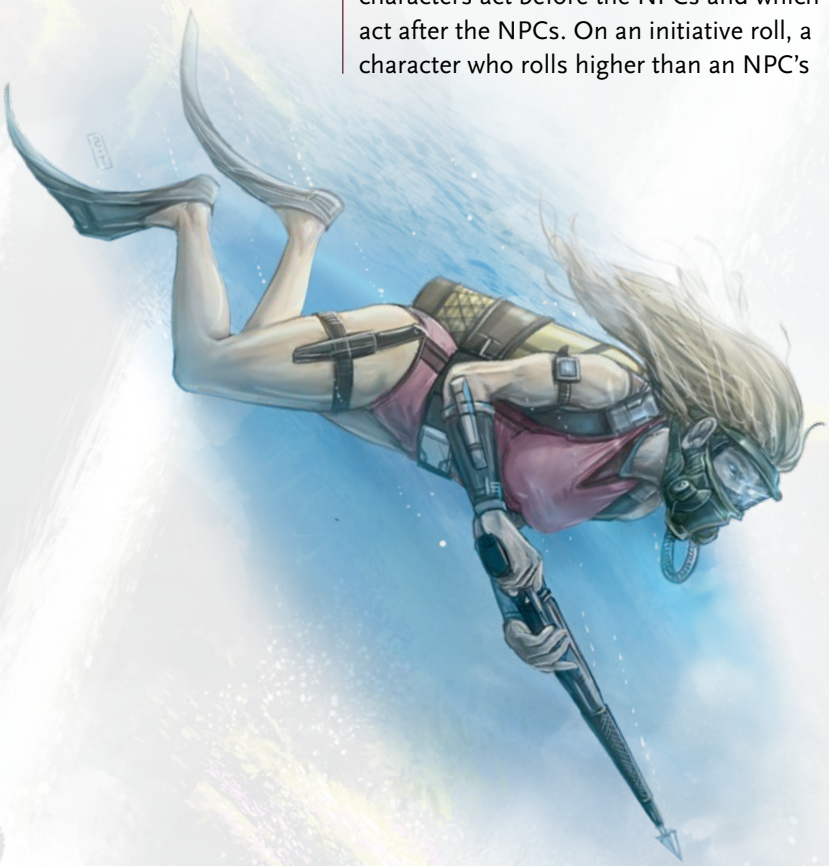
To determine who goes first, second, and so on in a round, each player makes a Speed roll called an *initiative roll*. Most of the time, it's only important to know which characters act before the NPCs and which act after the NPCs. On an initiative roll, a character who rolls higher than an NPC's target number takes an action before the NPC does. As with all target numbers, an NPC's initiative roll target number is three times the NPC's level. Many times, the GM will have all NPCs take their actions at the same time, using the highest target number from among all the NPCs. Using this method, any characters who rolled higher than the target number act first, then all the NPCs act, and finally any characters who rolled lower than the target number act.

The order in which the characters act usually isn't important. If the players want to go in a precise order, they can act in initiative order (highest to lowest), by going around the table, by going oldest to youngest, and so on.

For example, Colin, James, and Shanna are in combat with two level 2 abhumans. The GM has the players make Speed rolls to determine initiative. Colin rolls an 8, Shanna rolls a 15, and James rolls a 4. The target number for a level 2 creature is 6, so each round Colin and Shanna act before the abhumans, then the abhumans act, and finally James acts. It doesn't matter whether Colin acts before or after Shanna, as long as they think it's fair.

After everyone—all PCs and NPCs—in the combat has had a turn, the round ends and a new round begins. In all rounds after the first, everyone acts in the same order as they did in the first round. The characters cycle through this order until the logical end of the encounter (the end of the fight or the completion of the event) or until the GM asks them to make new initiative rolls. The GM can call for new initiative rolls at the beginning of any new round when conditions drastically change. For example, if the NPCs gain reinforcements, the environment changes (perhaps the lights go out), the terrain changes (maybe part of the balcony collapses under the PCs), or something similar occurs, the GM can call for new initiative rolls.

Since the action moves as a cycle, anything that lasts for a round ends where it started in the cycle. If Vasagle the Adept uses an ability on an opponent that hinders its defenses for one round, the effect lasts until Vasagle acts on their next turn.



INTERACTION

Obviously, players can talk to each other all they want, and at least some of that conversation represents what the characters are saying to each other. Often, a PC will want to talk to an NPC. It might be to haggle with a shopkeeper, convince a guard to let them pass by, or just get information from someone in the know. This conversation is normally handled by the GM taking on the NPC role and talking things through. When a PC tries to convince an NPC of something, or when they try to deceive or intimidate the NPC, a roll is involved. This is handled just like anything else—use the level of the NPC as the difficulty, modified by the circumstances. Trying to convince a loyal soldier to disobey orders is harder than his level might indicate, but convincing the soldier that new orders have come in might be normal. Skills like persuasion or deception might help, and of course Effort can be used (always Intellect).

Although fighting dangerous beasts or other foes can be interesting and exciting, much of gameplay in the Cypher System probably involves other situations: overcoming obstacles, interacting with NPCs (guards, weird creatures, machine intelligences, or far weirder things!), solving mysteries, finding solutions to problems, blazing trails through the wilderness, sneaking, climbing, running, and all other kinds of exciting activities. Sometimes these actions allow PCs to achieve goals, such as "find the lost child in the woods" or "help escort a merchant to the next city." But more often than not, they propel characters toward making discoveries.

CORE OF GAMEPLAY

The core of gameplay in the Cypher System—the answer to the question "What do characters do in this game?"—is "Discover new things or old things that are new again." This can be the discovery of something a character can use, like an artifact. It makes the character more powerful because it almost certainly grants a new capability or option, but it's also a discovery unto itself and results in a gain of experience points.

Discovery can also mean finding a new procedure or device (something too big to be considered a piece of equipment) or even previously unknown information. If the PCs find an ancient hovertrain and get it working again so they can use it to reach a distant location, that's a discovery. If they locate a signal-receiving station and figure out how to turn off the transmission from an overhead satellite that's causing all the animals in the region to become hostile, that's a discovery. The common thread is that the PCs discover something that they can understand and put to use. A cure for a plague, the means to draw power from a hydroelectric plant, an operational flying craft, or an injection that grants the knowledge to create a protective force-field dome over a structure—these are all discoveries.

The GM should award between 1 and 4 XP at the end of a session if the characters made any significant discoveries.

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 they drop their 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 they do so, they don't get the 2 XP from the GM, and they must also spend 1 XP that they already have. If the player has no XP to spend, they can't refuse the intrusion.

The GM can also give players XP between sessions as a reward for recovering interesting artifacts or making discoveries during an adventure. 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.

A player can spend XP they've accumulated to reroll any die roll and take the better of the two rolls. Rerolling costs 1 XP.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHARACTER

Each character has a simple statement that describes them, like: "I am an [adjective] [noun] who [verb]."

For example, Sevit is a Swift Warrior who Wields Two Weapons at Once. Reiltas Kazan is an Intelligent Adept who Leads.

In this sentence, the *adjective* is called your descriptor.

The *noun* is your character type.

The *verb* is called your focus.

In some games, character type might be called your character class. It's the noun of the sentence "I am an *adjective noun* who *verbs*." You can choose from four character types: Warrior, Adept, Speaker, and Explorer.

Your descriptor places your character in the situation and helps provide motivation. It's the adjective of the sentence "I am an *adjective noun* who *verbs*."

Focus is what your character does best. It's the verb of the sentence "I am an *adjective noun* who *verbs*."

CHARACTER STATS

Every character has three defining characteristics (called "statistics" or "stats"): Might, Speed, and Intellect.

Might: The concepts of strength, endurance, constitution, hardiness, and physical prowess are all folded into Might.

Might governs actions from forcing doors open to resisting disease. It's also the primary means of determining how much damage your character can sustain. Characters interested in fighting focus on Might.

Speed: Speed embodies quickness, movement, dexterity, and reflexes. Speed governs dodging attacks, sneaking around, or throwing a ball accurately. Nimble, fast, or sneaky characters have good Speed stats.

Intellect: Intellect encompasses intelligence, wisdom, charisma, education, reasoning, wit, willpower, and charm. Intellect governs solving puzzles, remembering facts, telling convincing lies, and using mental powers. Characters good at communicating effectively or wielding magic stress their Intellect stat.

POOL, EDGE, AND EFFORT

Each of the three stats has two components: Pool and Edge. Your Pool represents raw ability, and your Edge represents knowing how to use what you have. A third element ties into this concept: Effort. When your character really needs to accomplish a task, apply Effort.

POOL

A Pool is the most basic measurement of a stat. Comparing the Pools of two creatures gives a general sense of which is superior. For example, Lotadil has a Might Pool of 18, and thus is stronger than Bronea, who has a Might Pool of 12. Most average characters have a Pool of 9 to 12 in most stats.

When your character is injured, sickened, or attacked, you temporarily lose points from one of your stat Pools. The nature of the attack determines which Pool loses points. Physical damage from a sword reduces your Might Pool, a poison that makes you clumsy reduces your Speed Pool, and a psionic blast reduces your Intellect Pool. You can rest to regain lost points from a stat Pool (see Recovering Points in a Pool, page 8).

EDGE

Pool is the basic measurement of a stat, but Edge is also important. When something requires you to spend points from a stat Pool, Edge reduces the cost. It also reduces the cost of applying Effort to a roll.

For example, Reiltas Kazan wants to use the Onslaught ability, which costs 1 point from his Intellect Pool. Subtract his 1 Intellect Edge from the activation cost, and the result is how many points he must spend. Since the result is 0, the ability is free.

EFFORT

When your character really needs to accomplish a task, apply Effort. Applying Effort requires spending 3 points from the stat Pool appropriate to the action. Thus, if your character tries to dodge (a Speed roll) and wants to increase the chance for success, you can apply Effort by spending 3 points from your Speed Pool. The game master determines the difficulty of the task (1 to 10). Effort eases the task by one step. So, if the difficulty is 5, using Effort makes it 4. This must be done before you attempt a roll.

Every character has an Effort score, which indicates the maximum number of levels of Effort that can be applied.

When you apply Effort, subtract your relevant Edge from the total cost of applying Effort. For example, let's say you need to make a Speed roll. You apply one level of Effort, which will ease the task by one step. Normally, that would cost 3 points from your Speed Pool. However, you have a Speed Edge of 1, so you subtract that from the cost. So, it only costs 2 points from your Speed Pool.

Skills, equipment, and special abilities can also ease a task and can be used in conjunction with Effort.

EFFORT AND DAMAGE

Instead of applying Effort to ease your attack, you can apply Effort to increase the amount of damage you inflict for any kind of attack. For each level of Effort, you inflict 3 additional points of damage.

When using Effort to increase the damage of an area attack, such as the explosion created by a detonation cypher, you inflict 2 additional points of damage instead of 3 points. But those points are dealt to all targets in the area. Even if one or more of the targets in the area resists, you still inflict 1 point of damage to them.

SKILLS (AND INABILITIES)

Your character has training in a handful of specific skills. For example, you might be trained in sneaking, climbing and jumping, or social interactions. 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, ease that task by one step. If you are specialized, ease it by two steps. A skill can never ease a task by more than two steps, but you can use a skill and Effort together.

You can always attempt any action—you do not need to be trained or specialized in a related skill. In other words, being trained in climbing doesn't let you climb, it just makes you good at it. Anyone can still try to climb. It's just a bit harder.

Some characters have inabilities. If a character has an inability in a task, the difficulty of that task is hindered.

SPECIAL ABILITIES

Character types and foci grant PCs special abilities. Using these abilities usually costs points from your stat Pools (listed in parentheses after the ability name). Your Edge in the appropriate stat can reduce the cost, but you can only apply Edge once per action. For example, let's say an Adept with an Intellect Edge of 2 wants to use their Onslaught ability, which costs 1 Intellect point. They also want to increase the damage by using a level of Effort, which costs 3 Intellect points. The total cost for the action is 2 points from their Intellect Pool (1 point for the Onslaught plus 3 points for using Effort minus 2 points from their Edge).

Sometimes the point cost for an ability has a + sign after the number. That means you can spend more points or more levels of Effort to improve the ability.

Many special abilities grant a character the option of performing an *action* that they couldn't normally do, such as projecting rays of cold or attacking multiple foes at once. Using one of these abilities is an action unto itself, and the end of the ability's description says "Action" to remind you.

You can always attempt any action—you do not need to be trained or specialized in a related skill. In other words, being trained in climbing doesn't let you climb, it just makes you good at it. Anyone can still try to climb. It's just a bit harder.

Some special abilities allow you to perform a familiar action—one that you can already do—in a different way. For example, an ability might let you wear heavy armor or add 2 points of fire damage to your weapon damage. These are called *enablers*. Using one of these abilities is not considered an action. Enablers either function constantly (such as being able to wear heavy armor) or happen as part of another action (such as adding fire damage to your weapon damage, which happens as part of your attack). If a special ability is an enabler, the end of the ability's description says "Enabler" to remind you.

CYPHERS

Cyphers have a single use. They might allow you to fly or become temporarily invisible. Each character has a cypher limit indicating how many cyphers they can have at the same time.

You can use your cyphers to activate their abilities as your action, just as you would a special ability. The only difference is that once you've used a cypher, it's gone.

Characters will find new cyphers frequently during the game, so players shouldn't hesitate to use their cypher abilities.

There are two kinds of cyphers: manifest and subtle.

Manifest cyphers have physical form: potions, runes, drugs, gadgets, and so on. These are great for fantasy, sci-fi, horror, and superhero games.

Subtle cyphers are more like inherent abilities. They work especially well in modern or horror games.

EQUIPMENT AND MONEY

Each character has normal equipment they can use, including backpacks, ropes, torches, and so on. Depending on the setting, you might have additional equipment, such as jet packs for a sci-fi game or cell phones for a modern setting.

The currency of a Cypher System game also depends on the setting. The GM might decide to use dollars, pounds, euros, credits, gold pieces, Martian solval beads, bottle caps, and so on. To handle this, the Cypher System rules use generalities rather than specifics—goods and services are talked about in terms of inexpensive, moderately priced, expensive, very expensive, or exorbitant. An inexpensive item might be a simple meal or a drink in the bar, while an exorbitant item is something very high-end, like a nice house or spaceship.