

The Shaper/Mechanist universe in [Risus](#)

Bruce Sterling is a great writer all the way around, but my favorite thing he's ever done is [Schismatrix](#) and the rest of the "Shaper/Mechanist" stories. I've tried to game this setting before in GURPS, but character creation seems to have frightened my players away. I'm hoping that with a little work, S. John Ross's free [Risus](#) system might prove to be a bit easier to game this stuff in. Right now, the cliches might not make much sense to people who haven't read the source material... but I'm leery of summarizing Mr. Sterling's work here until I check on the copyright implications. Anyway, this is very much a work in progress, so please [e-mail](#) me with suggestions, particularly if you know this body of work.

Cliches

There is a bewildering variety of odd things to do with your life in the [Schismatrix](#) setting. Here are a few (Note - some of these should either be added to a "core" cliché like Shaper or Mechanist, or the character must have the named "core" in a separate cliché).

- Shaper (core) - being superior to Mechanists and unmodified humans, knitting, advanced biotech, rampant psychodrug usage
- Mechanist (core) - being superior to Shapers and unmodified humans, longer living through prosthetics, computer modeling, random cyborg stuff
- Investor (core) - being a huge reptilian alien from a high-grav world, greed, amassing huge wealth, playing one faction against another, having lots of high tech wonders but not understanding them
- Ensign - (Investor) dealing with humanity, being a slightly less huge alien from a high-grav world, serving his queen
- Queen - (Investor) being hellaciously rich, getting blinded by avarice, ostracizing pervers
- Superbright - (Shaper) brilliance, paranoia, convoluted plotting, surviving political purges
- Academic Security - (Shaper) Cold War style paranoia, being politically reliable, intelligence gathering, social standing in Ring Council
- Diplomat - (Shaper) absolute control of face and body language, reading people like books, instantly appearing trustworthy

- Antibiotic - (Shaper) tracking, assassinating, perfect disguises, prehensile feet, hand to hand (to foot) combat, warped politeness, unbuyability
 - Wirehead - (Mechanist) being more machine than man, living forever, stock market wizardry
 - Bacillus - (Mechanist) spying for the Ring Council, affecting Shaper fashions, espionage, sabotage, unsettling the social order
 - Cicada - urbanity, rumor-mongering, playing the market, research, joining some powerful clique, doing unspeakable things in the discreets
 - Cataclyst - grandiose schemes, abducting people, conducting ice assassinations
 - Ice Assassination victim - losing a few years, being much more mellow than before, losing all preconceptions
 - Yakuza guard - abusing human growth hormones, abusing humans, brawling, intimidating, picking people up by the head
 - Nephrene Black Medical - advanced biochemical tricks, rendering people down to sell their component chemicals, living in sterile environments, being wealthy but isolated
 - Sundog - conning people, scavenging, being an opportunist, running the hell away when things get bad
 - Lobster - (Mechanist splinter faction) surviving hard vacuum, being armored, speaking radio, having sex by wire, all looking alike
 - Harem Police - gently extracting technical data from Michael Carnassus, offering theraputic physical contact, performing traditional security/police functions
 - Wallchild - total devotion to the Wallmother, diplomacy, security, maintaining biomechanical architecture
 - Patternist - (Shaper faction) cerebral asymmetry, high intelligence, intuition, pattern recognition, flashes of genius, susceptibility to paranoia and fugue states
 - Zen Serotonist - permanent drug-induced calm, working to slow technological growth, immunity to strong emotion, converting people to the Nonmovement by example
 - Ambassador to alien species - high intelligence, mental flexibility, ideological purity, possible physical alterations, mastery of a field related to species visited
 - Ambassador (after returning) -as above, plus: mental instability/illness, potential addiction, possible ideological unsoundness/disloyalty, chance of knowing breakthrough techniques or technologies
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Character Creation Options (thanks to Karl Paananen and Guy Hoyle for suggestions that led to this)

Option A: At creation, players may wish to buy points in a "core" cliché, the prime examples from the early days of the Shaper/Mechanist setting being, obviously, "Shaper" or "Mechanist." Then, as the game progresses, the player may modify the cliché when an improvement roll is made. For example, you might start off as a "Mechanist(3)," et cetera, then as the game progresses and your "Mechanist" cliché rises, you can change to a "Heavily Cyborged Mechanist(4)" or a "Mechanist Trade Liason(4)." This can be useful if the player wants to start off in a general direction and become more specialized or focused as a natural part of the character's development. It can also be good for players in a group who aren't as familiar with the setting as other players. By starting off with something a little broad, as they explore the setting they can decide exactly what type of Shaper, Lobster, or what-have-you they want to become. The only real restriction is that the new additions must be logical in the context of the campaign, and fitting to the "core" cliché (and yes, both those determinations will pretty much be by GM fiat).

The other, related method is to keep the "core" cliché by itself, and just add a new, closely related cliché. This gives the character something to fall back on if one cliché gets injured in combat. So, if your "Mechanist(4)" has lost 3 dice in combat against a "Shaper(5)" (which could be anything from trying to beat each other to death to subtle industrial espionage to an ongoing economic conflict), you could then swap in your "Pirate(2)", "Bacillus(4)," or "Trade Liason(3)."

Option B: Lots of characters in the Schismatrix setting are really single minded. Really super extra double creepy single minded. So much so, that some of them seem to be pretty much one (or maybe two) cliché characters. If this fits the player's character concept and the GM feels that the cliché is powerful and/or tricky enough (in whatever sense) to justify it, the player can buy high levels in a double-pump cliché. This can easily use up most of the character creation budget, making a character who is very good indeed at a limited sphere of activity but not able to deal with other situations well. It also avoids the problem of having a ruthless, single-minded product of, say, the Shaper military-educational apparatus, saddled with "extra" clichés that dilute his cutthroat dedication to the Ring Council. While this makes the character more "brittle," such inflexible savants and one-trick ponies can be found throughout the source material.

Some players may enjoy playing such a character as the PC either naturally expands into new fields or gets broken on the rocks of fate...

Option C: Some portion of the character's creation dice may be held back to be spent after the start of play. The main character in Schismatrix starts out as one thing, and very early on gets ejected from his home and has to learn to fit in somewhere else, then moves on again and again, and so on. A good, setting-appropriate way to model this might be for the PCs to reserve some of their dice to be spent after the game starts. This can be used to simulate the combination of culture-shock and extreme adaptability many of the characters in the book display once they are forced out of their niche and into the big bad Schismatrix.