

X-Ω

Ability Ranks

X-Ω is a framework for a roleplaying game that is designed to be diceless, but lends itself to using dice if desired. The (working) name comes from the ability ranks, as follows:¹

Rank	Ability Description
X	Terrible, incompetent, hopeless
0	Average, default, mediocre
1	Fair, novice, apprentice
2	Good, seasoned, journeyman
3	Great, veteran, tradesman
4	Excellent, expert, master
5	Extraordinary, elite, grand master
Ω	Legendary, ultimate, unbeatable

The rank of X denotes someone who has no clue what they are doing and will almost always fail at any but the most fundamental tasks. Conversely, the rank of Ω is used for someone who is at the pinnacle of ability and will succeed at almost every task. Normal abilities have a default value of 0. Supernatural abilities default to X.

When a character performs an action, the success or failure is determined by comparing the appropriate ability to the difficulty of the task. The difficulty is based on a variety of factors, but one way to set the difficulty is to ask "what ability level would someone need to achieve a marginal success?" When the abilities of two characters are opposed in some task, their ability ranks become the base difficulty (which can be modified due to other factors) for each other's actions.

Ability versus Difficulty	Outcome
Ability lower by 3 or more	Major Failure
Ability lower by 1 or 2	Moderate Failure
Ability equals difficulty	Marginal Result
Ability greater by 1 or 2	Moderate Success
Ability greater by 3 or more	Major Success

¹ Similarities to the scale used by Fudge and Castle Falkenstein are intentional.

Outcomes

Marginal results are neither complete successes nor complete failures. The exact interpretation depends on the circumstances, but a handy guideline is to declare, "You succeed, but..."

Examples of Marginal Results
You jumped the chasm, but you're hanging by your fingertips onto a tree root and now the natives are throwing spears at you.
You fixed the damage to the car, but you're leaking oil pretty badly and will not make it more than ten miles.
You found the article in the archives, but it took far longer than you wanted, and now it is well past dark and library is closing.
You landed the plane, but came short of the runway and the landing gear is damaged; taking off again will be more difficult.

Major successes provide a benefit in speed and/or quality that will help the character at least temporarily. Even if no other advantage is given, the character make it look easy, but if the difficulty was low, then a major success probably is not noteworthy. One way to describe a major success is to say, "You succeed, and..."

Moderate successes achieve everything the character set out to do without any side effects (positive or negative). In some cases, the character can exchange speed for quality (or vice-versa) and still achieve a solid success. For example, a character is able to find an important (and illegal) item on the black market, but may wish to spend extra time to pay less or may pay more to insure the seller's discretion.

Major failures are fumbles, blunders, and botches that make things worse than when the character started. Something went wrong and now the circumstances are more dire and/or more difficult than they were before. The severity of the setback should be proportional to the danger and risk involved. A major failure while web surfing may infect a computer with an virus, but should not cause the motherboard to fail.

Moderate failures do not provide any additional negative consequences beyond not accomplishing the desired goals. The consequences of failure vary dramatically depending on the task. Failing a fix a busted fan belt means the characters will have to walk; failing to disarm a bomb can spell disaster in the character's immediate future.

In many cases, failures (moderate or major) can be avoided if the character's ability is clearly not up to the task. For example, failing to climb up the side of a skyscraper can be very dire for the character, but characters who lack the athletic ability would probably not have progressed past the first few steps before stopping and giving up. Furthermore, if the character lacks the minimum amount of technical skill required for the task, then the character will simply not get anywhere. When appropriate, a failure can simply mean the character never fully tried in the first place.

When determining the outcome, ranks X and Ω can be treated as having the numerical values of -1 and 6, respectively, but players are advised caution in this approach. The rank of Ω is the cap—no one can be any better—but thinking of it as rank 6 invites the notion of a rank 7 (or higher!). Also, if dice are used, someone with rank 5 should not beat a rank Ω person simply because of good luck or lose to a rank X person due to bad luck.

Karma Tokens

The GM and players each begin the game with an equal number of karma tokens. Spent tokens transfer from GM to player, player to GM, or even player to player, depending on the use. Anyone can suggest using a token for any purpose at any time, but the final decision belongs to the player (or GM) who would spend the token. Once this decision is made, it cannot be countered or reverse by someone else spending tokens.

The outcome of a task can also be bumped up or down by use of karma tokens. Each token spent on behalf of the character improves the outcome by one step; each token spent against the character worsens the outcome by one step. These can be used before or after the result is determined, essentially backing up to revise the outcome. Generally, the shifting of outcomes up or down should be reflected by some fortunate or unfortunate circumstance such as finding a spare part or a breaking a vital tool. Abilities with rank X can never achieve better than marginal results; conversely, rank Ω abilities should always achieve at least a marginal result.

Players can give karma tokens to the GM and introduce new plot elements into the game. These elements can be parts of the scenery, the introduction of secondary characters, or the revelation of new facts. They can involve coincidences and personal relationships similar to those found in many stories. These additions should be con-

structive and make the game feel more collaborative, more interesting, and more enjoyable for everyone playing.

The base cost depends on how much the element affects the plot. This can be modified up for events that are unlikely or threaten the suspension of disbelief. The cost is reduced if the element is a constructive contribution to the game.

Cost	Element
0	Minor, trivial, cosmetic element such as the name of a street, color of a car, or make and model of a gun.
1	Moderate element, such as having the police show up (or not) or having once dated the desk clerk (making things to more smoothly).
2	Major element, such as a new character with vital skills or information or a traffic jam to prevent or facilitate a clean getaway.
+1	Unlikely occurrence, one that makes the players think "what?" or "you've got to me kidding me" or "no way is that possible."
-1	Makes the GM's role easier, such as providing a way around an impasse or dead end or by providing additional depth without much work.
-1	Is just a really cool, fun, interesting idea.

Yes, it is possible to introduce a really cool, moderate element that makes the GM's role easier and earn a karma token rather than pay one. This is a reward for making a positive contribution to the game.

Because the criteria of plot elements are subjective, all the players can make a case for the appropriate cost, but the GM has the final say. The GM can also veto these elements (the player pays no karma tokens) if they are too disruptive or too unbelievable. Also, the GM does not have to pay for introducing plot elements (and all GM-introduced should make the game more enjoyable).

It is important for players to understand that using karma tokens (or trying to earn them) for plot elements can make the GM's role very difficult by disrupting subplots, throwing monkey wrenches into plots, shortcutting mysteries, and forcing the GM to improvise more. A player who introduces too many plot elements also tends to hog game time from other players and care must be taken not to overshadow other PCs with new elements. A good player knows how to share.

More to follow, including more details on setting difficulties and how to handle X and Ω ranks.

Comments on Issue #388

Ty Beard

Your analysis of the Mongoose Traveller rules was very thorough.

Your survival rates confused me until I realized you were only rolling for survival three times for 4 terms. Why is that? Even on the last term, you have to roll survival before you have a choice of whether or not to leave. I do agree that lower-survival career paths probably should provide greater benefits or additional perks in proportion to the increased risk.

Version 3.1 requires a minimum of 40% of creation points be spent on characteristics. For physical characteristics, there is a reason to get an 8 rather than a 6, since the former provides more hit points. Otherwise, one (admittedly fiddly) solution would be to give partial bonuses. A 9 is +1. A 10 gives +2 to one skill (and +1 to all others). An 11 gives a +2 to two skills (and +1 to all others). A 12 gives a +2 to all skills. Another method is to allow characteristics to increase during play to the next beneficial break point.

I had not thought of the Effect and Timing dice problem. Thank you for pointing it out. My inclination is to reverse the Effect and Timing dice such that lower is better. But I haven't worked out the math and I'm not curious enough to do so.

Myles Corcoran

Having ever only met him once briefly and tangentially, I bear no ill will toward Greg Stolze. I just find ORE to be painfully fiddly (and UA to be needlessly fiddly). And like to use violent hyperbole. :)

Doc Cross

Welcome back! I liked the amount of interesting character details (I can really imagine you playing these) you achieved in the abbreviated space.

Michael Cule

Having No Sense of Humor doesn't mean you can't make quips, but it does mean that you have to be more discerning in your delivery of straight lines and a GM who appreciates it.

Robert A. Dushay

The difficulty in healing damage in TFT is only a flaw if you want rapid, D&D- or CRPG-style healing. Otherwise, I'd consider it a feature. Of all

the elements of traditional fantasy roleplaying that I have the most trouble accepting, magical healing is among the leaders (along with dragon ecology, centuries-old races, and plethora of magic items).

I loved "Does he have a habit?" and the smart-ass responses.

While evolution² favors differentiation, I think it is a myth that evolution moves towards complexity. Look at the horse hoof. Certainly, that is a much simpler construction than the complex five-toed foot it evolved from.

"Our impression that life evolves toward greater complexity is probably only a bias inspired by parochial focus on ourselves, and consequent overattention to complexifying creatures, while we ignore just as many lineages adapting equally well by becoming simpler in form."³ But then, "We show that, because natural selection forces genomes to behave as a natural 'Maxwell Demon,' within a fixed environment, genomic complexity is forced to increase."⁴

I think what happens is that while the evolution of form and function may sometimes reduce complexity, the genetic changes required make the overall genome more complex (and I don't think you meant genomic complexity).

Lee Gold

The question is not what do superheros do between crises but how much of those activities do you (and the other players) want to roleplay? Is the GM prepared to deal with them? Is there an interesting story to be told? What is or isn't featured varies from campaign to campaign, group to group, as is what the GM and players want to emphasize or explore.

So, I guess I didn't mean tragedies to refer to a type of story in which random, meaningless death was appropriate. What word should I have used?

Spike Y Jones

The Soviets also had an unmanned lander on the moon before the U.S. got there.

Good points about the futility of countering false claims. This phenomena has been the hallmark of the Dubya/Rove era, the same one that gave us swiftboating.

2 We probably mean natural selection, which is distinct from evolution.

3 <http://brembs.net/gould.html>

4 <http://www.pnas.org/cgi/content/full/97/9/4463>

Joshua Stronghold Kronengold

I apologize for my spellcheck. I haven't added everyone's last names due to worries that I'd add a misspelled version.

All non-capital ships in *Star Wars* seem to be capable of atmospheric flight, so some degree of aeronautic design elements would not be out of place. There are also the fads and trends in body design and modeling that may favor sleek designs some years and blockier designs other years. I would think you could tell when and where a ship was designed based on its look. Because space is so weird to human experience and perception, I can forgive their airplane-like banking in space (but not the noises they make) as artistic license.

In an online game, I created a paladin with a Weapon Focus in Longsword. I then found a Holy Avenger that was a bastard sword. The "retrain" option allowed me to change out Weapon Focus for Exotic Weapon (which allowed me to maintain use of my (legacy) magical shield) rather than be stuck with a now-pointless feat. It worked, but it wasn't really elegant. And another player had to tell me about it because I don't own the PHB II and it isn't in the SRD.

Even if Versatility was linear, the player could still prepay for slots, filling them in during play. My suggestion of linearity was based on the observation that the examples provided were linear. The distinction I was making wasn't linear versus logarithmic, but definite versus squishy. Explicitly enumerating the variety of uses and paying for them individually does have its benefits.

Louis La Mancusa

The funny thing about reading anything (such as a lame joke) is that you can't ignore it once you've read it. Brains don't work that way.

So, what you're saying is that Jesus specifically used language that would confuse, rather than convert or enlighten, the non-believers? Parables are then like a secret code that only makes sense to those inside the cult, those who have drunk the Kool-Aid as they say. The more learn about religion, the more I'm convinced it's all made-up.

I suggest you read the Declaration of Independence, especially the part that says "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Very recent history has shown that intelligent, educated people,⁵ can be "easily fooled, easily manipulated." In your meritocracy, can the dumb-but-

5 Even medical doctors and lawyers.

entitled vote? What about the brilliant-but-poor? I am unimpressed by your reality.

You aren't distributing newspaper clippings to a classroom. You aren't using select essays in a civics course. This is a gaming APA and your use of others' works in no way qualifies as "education" in terms of the fair use standard.

Clearly, while the use of corn-based ethanol is a good, proven source that can jump-start ethanol market, it is not a good long-term solution. Other sources, such as grass,⁶ are required. As with solar and other alternative energies, the key is to create a number of options to best fit the application rather than put all our hopes on a single energy source (including oil, foreign and domestic).

Brian Rogers

Why use Hero for *Blood of the Gods*, and T&J for *A League of Your Own*? Is it just the added crunchiness for a high versus medium combat focus?

Your analysis of the voting left me dizzy. I can't imagine giving that many players that many choices. I'm still not sure what you'll be running. :)

Marco Subias

That was a touching memorial to Catzilla. I dread the day when our Rufus⁷ dies. My wife, Terri, raised him from a bottle and even has a tattoo of him. We dread the eventual loss of our other two cats,⁸ of course, but I fear Rufus will be especially hard on her.

Steven D Warble

Welcome. Why does your name sound familiar? Were you here before?

Your hatred of inelegance,⁹ seems at odds with your liking WFRP, which I understand is a hodgepodge of different resolution systems. Perhaps in this case the setting and theme override the system?

Windmill Follow Up

The SF Chronicle has an article¹⁰ on the hundreds of birds killed each year at the Altamont Pass Wind Resource Area.

6 <http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=grass-makes-better-ethanol-than-corn>

7 Named after the cat from *Re-Animator*.

8 Beaumont (Beau for short) and Spike, both girls.

9 An opinion I share with you. And yes, it's a (non-hyphenated) word.

10 <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2008/01/02/MNITTM9FA.DTL>