



Bullet Points

Question Roundup, Part 1

By Owen K.C. Stephens

Welcome to the latest installment of *Bullet Points*. I'm Owen K.C. Stephens, writer of a lot of material for the **Star Wars Roleplaying Game** and the **d20 Modern** game, author of the *d20 Cyberscape* book, and co-author of the *d20 Apocalypse* supplement. It's my job to answer your questions about the game, offer advice on tricky rules issues, and give you a little peek into the design philosophy of the game.


Every two weeks I pick an issue that's provoked a lot of questions or comments, begin with a general discussion of the topic where applicable, and then answer specific questions related to it. If the mailbox contains any unrelated but pressing questions, I might tackle them at the end of the column, but only if I have room and they can't wait for an appropriately themed column.

Question Roundup, Part 1

In the course of examining various issues from specific books in the **d20 Modern** game line, I've encountered some questions that don't really fit into any of my themed installments. Just to catch up, I want to grab some leftover questions and answer them in the next few installments, regardless of what book they relate to.

Questions and Answers

Now without further ado, let's get down to the questions!

 **Why is it easier to take the Mage advanced class than the Occultist advanced class? The Mage is more powerful than the Occultist but has fewer prerequisites. Though the Mage has better Defense, saving throws, reputation bonus, skill points per level, and spells, he needs only 6 ranks in each of four skills, and the Occultist needs 6 ranks in three skills plus two feats! I'd like to add the Occultist class to my campaign because it has a lot of flavor, and I like to include alternative approaches to magic, but it seems too weak. It feels like a class for GM characters or ordinaries, and I don't know how to encourage the players to take levels in that rather than in the Mage class.**

To begin with, it's actually easier for a character with fewer skill points to qualify as an Occultist than as a Mage, since everyone gets the same number of feats. Furthermore, the feats that the Occultist requires grant bonuses on skills that the character should regularly be using. Nevertheless, if the requirements seem too stiff for your campaign, feel free to drop one skill and/or one feat (Decipher Script or Educated, for example) from the Occultist's prerequisites list.


The reason that Mages seem more powerful than Occultists has to do with campaign expectations. The Occultist is designed to work in a Shadow Chasers campaign, which is based on the idea that heroes have access to only limited amounts of magic. In a world that has no Battle Minds, Mages, or Acolytes, and only a scant few magic items, the sacrifices an Occultist has to make for just a little magical power are reasonable and well balanced. The Mage, on the other hand, is designed to work in an Urban Arcana campaign, in which magic is much more

common among heroes, and a flashier style of spellcasting is appropriate.

If you think about it, however, the two classes actually aren't all that unbalanced in relation to one another -- they just have different levels of arcane access. For example, the Occultist's spell resistance, while low, protects her in ways that no Mage can duplicate. Similarly, the Occultist can find magic items at higher levels and can eventually even banish shadow creatures. These abilities combined with a shadow contact and the ability to bind a shadow creature to her service give an Occultist many sources of information that a Mage lacks. In short, the Occultist is more of an information-based class than the Mage, and is better suited for researching the weaknesses of mystic foes than for facing them in direct combat.

The best way to encourage players to take levels in Occultist is to set up a campaign that rewards that class's abilities. If, for example, all monsters have weaknesses that the Occultist can discover through her contacts, or even just by speaking with a shadow creature bound to her service, her class abilities come to the fore. Similarly, if many of the foes the heroes face can cast 1st- or 2nd-level spells, the Occultist's spell resistance becomes quite valuable.

If you want to show players how useful an Occultist might be, give them an older, more experienced Occultist as an ally early in the game. Later, when that ally is lost (called away, killed, or even turned against them), the heroes must decide whether they want access to those abilities strongly enough to take Occultist levels themselves.

 **If a PC uses autofire against a 10-foot area on the other side of a wall, how much damage would he actually deal? Would I subtract the hardness of the wall from the overall damage? How much of the damage would be dealt to the wall versus the creatures on the other side? Also, would the creatures on the other side of the wall be caught flat-footed and denied their Reflex saves because they were unaware of the attack?**

First of all, you have to decide whether the attackers can actually target a 10-foot square that they can't see because it's on the other side of a wall. Randomly selecting an area that's directly beyond the wall is clearly reasonable, but they probably can't attack the specific 10-foot area that holds the foes they just saw run around a corner, or target an area 40 feet beyond the wall, unless they have some other way to gain targeting information. As GM, you have to make that call. The targets on the other side won't be flat-footed if they're already in combat (as is normal for the flat-footed rules), though you could certainly penalize Listen or Spot checks made to notice someone on the other side of a wall initiating combat.

Next, you need to determine what bonus, if any, the targets gain on their Reflex saves against the autofire attack. If the wall is so weak that the attack can overcome its hardness and hit points even if it deals only minimum damage, then the wall acts as concealment. A good example would be firing through the wall of a tent. Since concealment doesn't grant any bonus on Reflex saves, the targets gain no benefit in this case. However, you can assign the miss chance for total concealment to the autofire attack roll against the area's Defense of 10. On a failure, the bullets simply scatter over too large an area to qualify as an autofire attack, which depends on concentrated firepower.

If the wall in question is tough enough that the attack isn't guaranteed to get through, then it functions as cover. A character can't target through total cover, but if you as GM want to allow it, treat the wall as three-quarters cover for the purpose of the autofire attack. The +7 cover bonus that the wall grants to Defense gives the area a Defense of 17 instead of the normal 10, and everyone in the area gains a +3 bonus on his Reflex save against the autofire attack.

Finally, if the autofire attack successfully hits one or more creatures, apply the hardness and hit points of the wall to every damage roll made. Since the attack automatically hits the wall, every bullet must actually punch through it before damaging a target beyond it, though a round or two of such damage may well destroy the cover.

For example, suppose Moondog is riding behind an M2HB mounted on a jeep that's patrolling an abandoned city when he sees four bugbear scavengers dash into an old storefront with thin wooden walls. He randomly selects one 10-foot area behind the wall as the target for an autofire attack, and the GM determines that his choice is reasonable. The 1-inch-thick wooden wall has hardness 5 and 10 hp, so the GM treats it as three-quarters cover for the purpose of the autofire attack. If Moondog cannot not hit Defense 17, the autofire attack will be too dispersed to succeed, but he does hit. Each of the three bugbears that happened to be in the area he chose must make a DC 15 Reflex save with a +3 bonus for cover. One succeeds and takes no damage; the other two fail. Moondog's player rolls 2d12 for damage twice, getting results of 13 and 20. The hardness and hp of the wall are then subtracted from these values, so the first attack fails to get through the wall, and the second deals 5 points of damage to the bugbear in question. Furthermore, the GM rules that the attack has chewed up that portion of the wall to such an extent that it now provides only one-quarter cover against subsequent autofire attacks.



I'm starting to run a mech campaign for my group, but I can't figure out how to calculate massive damage for mecha. Am I missing a system somewhere? I don't think it would be based on the pilot's personal massive damage rating because mecha weapons deal so much damage. I thought about just using half the mecha's hit points, but that method would render mecha all but immune to the effect even before hardness is calculated. Please help!

Mecha are vehicles. If you can't find a rule describing how mecha react in a particular situation, refer to the vehicle rules in the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*. As it happens, vehicles aren't subject to massive damage -- as long as they have hit points, they continue to work. Once a vehicle drops to 0 hit points, it is broken, though it may be repairable.

If you really want to add some kind of rule to simulate massive damage for mecha, I propose the following variant. Every vehicle has a massive damage threshold equal to 20% of its hit points. Any time it takes damage equal to or greater than this value from a single attack, it must make a DC 30 hardness check (1d20 + the vehicle's hardness) or immediately drop to 0 hp. You might also want to adapt the rules for shooting at tires to allow attacks that target other gear essentially outside the vehicle's body, such as spotlights, carried weapons, and jetpacks.

Do you have a rules question about the d20 Modern Roleplaying Game? Send it to bulletpoints@wizards.com. For the quickest possible answer, please put the topic of your question in the subject line and keep the question as succinct as possible. If you have more than one question, feel free to send two or more emails -- but for best results please include only one question per email unless your questions are very closely related to one another. Please don't expect a direct answer by email. Check back here every other week for the latest batch of answers!

About the Author

Owen Kirker Clifford Stephens was born in 1970 in Norman, Oklahoma. He attended the TSR Writer's Workshop held at the Wizards of the Coast Game Center in 1997 and moved to the Seattle area in 2000, after accepting a

job as a Game Designer at Wizards of the Coast, Inc. Fourteen months later, he returned to Oklahoma with his wife and three cats to pick up his freelance writer/developer career. He has author and co-author credits on numerous **Star Wars** and *EverQuest* projects, as well as *Bastards and Bloodlines* from Green Ronin. He also has producer credits for various IDA products, including the Stand-Ins printable figures.

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