

RESKINNING FOR GENRE

FIFTH EDITION'S PLIABLE MECHANICS MAKE IT easy to pick up and play while still allowing for variation and definition on a character-by-character basis. While predicated for medieval fantasy, you can easily take your game into a steampunk world or even the far future* with a little bit of tweaking and modified presentation. This article provides guidance on how to make the switch to a variety of genres, from post-apocalyptic to science fantasy, and provides rules for campaigns that utilize firearms and high technology wherein players and GMs want a more comprehensive feeling for genre.

Before exploring new character options and introducing new rules, first determine if you should be doing either. As noted above, part of what makes fifth edition such an enjoyable game is the flexible nature of its mechanics. Other systems often provide detailed rules for every possibility and the intentional exclusion of such nuanced directions for every situation has a multitude of effects in the game. The two we are most interested in here are the emphasis on "rulings not rules" and the flexibility this approach to mechanics offers in defining genre.

Fifth edition promotes the legitimacy of the GM. Without an encyclopedic set of simulation rules available, there can be plenty of GM-discretion calls throughout any regular game session. Tacking on a few more rulings because of a screwdriver getting jammed into a pneumatic robot or for a called shot against a villainous scientist's cyber eye won't be out of step.

This also makes the inclusion of additional rules easier to implement, but there's more to it—by authoritatively presenting creatures, enemies,

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* Kiel Chenier, "To the Stars," EN WORLD ENSIDER,
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hazards, and obstacles in a different light, the flavor of fifth edition can be quick changed from medieval to a host of other types of fantasy. A dragon or tiefling can easily become a flying mass of tentacles or a mutant that smells like sulfur using their existing rules instead of designing an entirely new creature or race. In a world of only humans, cybernetic enhancements can result in an elf or long-term exposure to radiation can breed tieflings, and in the future a barbarian's rage can be triggered by an adrenal stimulator, and an inventive nanite engineer can use microscopic explosives to cast *fireball*!

EXAMPLE GENRES

POST-APOCALYPTIC OR WESTERN

Both of these genres have two unifying traits that allow the ambitious GM to make the most out of the fifth edition rules: disparate civilization and a sense of the unknown. Whether through distance (like the Wild West of 19th-century America) or circumstance (like packs of flesh-eating zombies or territory too irradiated to travel through), societies in these two genres are removed from one another. From the GM's standpoint, this means that both information and technology are valuable resources, not unlike magic items.

There's little reason to introduce new rules as long as abilities granted to match the genre are properly rationed—guns have many advantages but whether they shoot bullets or lasers won't matter much if the weapon's ammunition is limited. There's also a strong sense of the unknown in both themes; where apocalyptic settings often bear this out through science fiction, Wild West fantasy typically has an underlying theme of mysticism (usually in close company with fate or luck) that lends itself to many elements already present in medieval fantasy.

CYBERPUNK AND FAR FUTURE

Arthur C. Clarke's third law of prediction is widely known: "Any sufficiently advanced

Mad Science Experiments

Many creatures are already perfectly suited to go straight out of the fifth edition rules and directly into an apocalyptic, modern, cyberpunk, steampunk, or far future game: aboleth, ankheg, bulette, centaur, chimera, dinosaurs, doppelganger, dryad, elementals, gibbering moulder, goblin, golems, gorgon, hellhound, hobgoblin, jackalwere, kobold, lizardfolk, lycanthropes, manticores, minotaur, oozes, orc, otyugh, peryton, roc, sahuagin, shambling mound, shield guardian, vampire, and of course, zombies.

technology is indistinguishable from magic." This makes the transition of a medieval fantasy game to the far future a simple one, though it alters the basic assumptions of the distribution of resources.

As mentioned above, a nanite-programming engineer can easily take the place of a spellcasting class, but the ubiquity and utility of modern equipment in the far future alters the design floor. Jetpacks, communicators, and devices able to rapidly heal wounds give PCs a decided advantage in these settings, but this can be offset on two fronts. Limiting the use of advanced equipment by short rests and long rests allows for a reasonable amount of resource control to remain in the GM's hands on an encounter by encounter basis. On the other hand, you can give monsters and NPCs similar advantages: for every extraordinary benefit granted to the PCs (such as the ability to fly, a 3rd-level spell), grant their enemies something roughly equivalent (not everyone needs to be up in the air, but a *haste* or *vampiric touch* ability can level the playing field).

MODERN OR SUPERHEROIC GAMES

Things get a little more difficult when taking a fifth edition game into a modern or superheroic setting. Though technology plays a less prevalent role, allowing for some GM resource control—but not an overwhelming amount—there's a definite expectation for abilities and effects (both from modern firearms or superpowers) that extend beyond the scope of the system's intent. In these



cases, take the same approach as a far future game: for every additional effect granted to the PCs, whether technological or super, do the same for their enemies.

In the case of firearms, the resulting increased damage output may change a party's on-the-ground tactics and character builds to match, but being riddled with bullets isn't quite so fatal for PCs because of fifth edition's death mechanics. It's worth noting that a "street-level" game of superhero vigilantism can be easily attained by handing out a few extra feats as adventurers gain levels.

NEW RULES

If simply skinning your game's descriptions and themes differently isn't going to cut it, consider including some new rules to bring the feel of the game in line with your group's expectations. This means some careful selection of monsters (see "Mad Science Experiments," above), mechanics to make firearms and other technology slightly less

advantageous, modifications to the game world's access to information and travel, and a few player options to spice things up.

GENRE AND TECHNOLOGY

ARMOR IMPROVEMENTS

The effectiveness of armor is tied to setting. In a world where simple muskets exist alongside swords and crossbows, the written rules for scale mail and plate still make sense. When automatic weapons or laser pistols become commonplace, though, scale mail and plate just aren't enough.

In Cyberpunk, Far Future, Modern, and Steampunk games, consider what constitutes light, medium, and heavy armor in your setting. In the future, heavy armor might be a hulking space marine suit, or even a personal mech. Half-plate becomes a Kevlar jacket, and a chain shirt can be reskinned as a lightweight bulletproof vest. Alternatively, to represent defensive technology keeping up with the power of laser cannons and energy blades, consider changing what classes

can access which levels of armor and increase the allowed Dexterity modifiers for medium and heavy armors (to Dex Modifier and Dex Modifier [max 2] respectively).

FIREARMS

Guns are rarer and more powerful in some settings than in others. Be mindful of how much ammunition you give your PCs access to in settings where guns are uncommon but deadly. If the PCs aren't able to make their own bullets in a fantasy setting, the flow of resources remains in your control. In Cyberpunk, Far Future, Modern, or other games where small arms are commonplace, consider making healing more available to offset the increased damage output (see statistics for firearms in the GM's core rulebook).

In Modern, Steampunk, and Western games, guns may have drawbacks that let other weapons shine, too. After a character's first ranged attack with a firearm in a round, the attacker must succeed on a Strength saving throw (based on the weapon's damage dice: 1d10—DC 11, 1d12—DC 12, 2d6—DC 13, 2d8—DC 14, 2d10—DC 15) or suffer disadvantage on all subsequent ranged attacks until the beginning of their next turn as the recoil of the shot offsets their aim. Guns are also loud—any wielder that fires an unsilenced firearm makes a Constitution saving throw (determined by the weapon's damage dice) or is deafened for 1 round. Making two saving throws each round can be a hassle, so these two drawbacks to firearms can be used on a case-by-case basis, depending on the theme of your game.



GADGETS

The ubiquity and utility of technology changes many presumptions of the design behind fifth edition; information and effects similar to spells are far more accessible to adventurers. With cell phones, global data networks, and cars that travel faster than an airborne mage, PCs are able to know things and travel between places far more quickly than normal. In these instances one rule of thumb should be omnipresent: a rising tide raises all ships.

In Cyberpunk, Far Future, Modern, or Steampunk games, create innocuous, affordable gadgets that perform tasks normally reserved for spells available to both PCs and NPCs. Limit these items by means of charge and locale (a cell phone with no power is a plastic brick and useless if there's no good signal coverage or too much interference). Do the PCs all have access to jetpacks (or *boots of flying*)? Grant the same benefits to important NPCs. Remember too that while many high-tech gadgets are a boon, they can quickly become a liability (a cell phone might get hacked, a damaged laser pistol might explode, and so on). So long as the frequency and availability of gadgets is equal for PCs and NPCs, the playing field should be evenly raised for both the players and the GM.

GENRE FEATS

GUNFIGHTER

Firearms are an integral part of how you fight and firing off a gun is second nature to you, granting the following benefits:

- ▶ You automatically succeed on Strength saving throws to avoid recoil and on Constitution saving throws to avoid become deafened by gunfire.
- ▶ You can use a reaction to fire a drawn, loaded firearm as an opportunity attack.
- ▶ Being adjacent to an enemy creature no longer imposes disadvantage on your ranged attacks.

SCIENTIFIC WIZARDRY

Prerequisite: Able to cast at least one spell or spell-like ability, science-fiction genre.

The true source of your extraordinary abilities lay in nanites, the manipulation of critical energies, or another marvelous technology.

- ▶ Your spells ignore resistances and immunities granted by spells not cast by a creature with this feat.
- ▶ Your spells are immune to *detect magic*, *dispel magic*, and *antimagic field* spells not cast by a creature with this feat.
- ▶ Illusion spells that you cast affect creatures that benefit from truesight so long as it is not a robotic creature or through an ability granted by a caster with this feat.

SUPER POWERED

Choose a single 2nd-level spell or two 1st-level spells. You are able to cast these spells a number of times equal to your proficiency bonus. The spells require only one component of your choice: material, somatic, or verbal.

Once you have cast these spells you must complete a short or long rest before you are able to cast them again.

The spellcasting ability of these spells is determined by your proficiency bonus instead of a regular spellcasting attribute. (For example, your spell save DC for these powers is 8 + double your proficiency bonus.)

ROBOTIC TEMPLATE

Complex machines appear throughout many genres of fantasy as androids, robots, and more. The robotic template is a simple addition for artificial creatures designed to be faster, stronger, and tougher than their organic counterparts. Any non-construct creature can become robotic. Robotic creatures retain all of their original statistics, with the following exceptions:

Challenge Rating: Robotic creatures increase their CR by 1.

DEFENSES

AC: Robotic creatures have a natural armor bonus of 2.

Resistances: bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical weapons; cold; fire.

Immunities: necrotic, poison, psychic

Condition Immunities: charmed, exhausted, frightened, poisoned

Vulnerabilities: acid, lightning

OFFENSE

Attacks: Robotic creatures gain a nonmagical +1 bonus on melee attack rolls and melee damage rolls made with natural weapons and unarmed strikes.

Speed: Robotic creatures increase all of their movement speeds by 20 feet.

TRAITS

Senses: Robotic creatures gain darkvision 90 ft. and a constant detect spell or other type of special vision.