Synergy

A Universal, Rules-Light, Role Playing Game
Version 1.5

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Introduction

The SYNERGY role playing game is designed with spontaneous storytelling in mind. This game provides a rules-light framework that is easy to understand, requires cheap common materials to play, and does not require any preparation time besides the time it takes to create a character. It is not tied to any particular setting or genre and allows each player to contribute equally to the development of the story.

"Synergy" is the interaction of two or more people that results in ideas that are greater than what the contributors could do on their own. There is no better title for this game, as it fosters creativity and cooperation, while ensuring that no one person dominates the game. A good example of this is how the role of *Story Manager* - the primary storyteller in the game – is passed around between players through game play.

I hope that you take the time to read through these rules, bring together a few friends, and find out what a great game this is for yourself.

The Rules

Game Concepts

- SYNERGY is a collaborative, rules-light, role playing game that focuses on spontaneity and storytelling.
- The Story Manager, the player with primary storytelling duties, will shift from player to player during game play (see *Story Manager* section for details.)
- All players must agree on a setting (time and place) and genre. Examples: Post-Civil War America / Zombie Apocalypse, *or* Bronze-age Britain / Alien Conspiracy.
    - Setting and genre do not need to be this outlandish; these are only examples.
- Any rule may be changed or added, temporarily or permanently, with the consensus of all players.

Materials Needed

- Three to six people are required to play SYNERGY. Less players will diminish the effectiveness of the system, while more players requires additional materials and may cause complications.
- Each player should have 5 six-sided dice. Players can share dice, but this is not recommended.
- There should be one standard deck of playing cards (no jokers) for the group. If there is more than six players, you will need two decks of playing cards.
    - When using two decks of playing cards there is a chance of a tie. If this happens, the players must discard, draw, and then choose another card.
- Paper and writing implements are needed for each player to create his own character.

Character Creation

- Each player creates one primary character that fits within the setting and genre of the game, as decided by the players.
    - It is helpful at this stage to discuss your primary character's back story with other players to get an idea how they may have met each other.

- Each character begins with 4 Traits. One Trait falls into each of these categories: Professional, Physical, Mental, and Social. A Trait is a short phrase that describes an aspect of your character. Almost any descriptive phrase can be a Trait.
- The name of the Professional Trait is decided by the player and should be between 2 and 5 words long. Examples Professional Traits: Teenage Cyber-Slacker, High School Football Coach, Elven Spell-Blade.
    - Professional Traits are decided solely by the player who owns the character to ensure that they get to play the type of character that they would enjoy.
- Each player then chooses 3 *possible* Traits for each of the remaining categories (Physical, Mental & Social), for a total of 9 Traits. Again, each Trait should be between 2 and 5 words long, and must be worded different than the other two Traits for that category.
    - It is important to reasonable when naming your character Traits. You can write down "Perfect shot" as a Trait, but your character's shooting will never truly be perfect. It is better to be colorful with the description of your Trait than try to game the system.
- Each player then hand her character off to the player to his right. This fellow player then crosses out one Physical, one Mental, and one Social Trait. The character is then passed to the next player to his right. This player crosses out one of each Trait type as well, before handing the character back to its creator.
    - This vetting process gives fellow players some input on your character. It serves as a check against any attempt to game the system, as well as ensure that the descriptions of Character Traits fit within the genre and setting.

- Each Trait Rating begins at one. Players then spread 6 points among her character's 4 Traits, *increasing* that Trait's Rating by one for every point, to a maximum of 6.

Story Manager

- The Story Manager sets the location of the current scene, controls all non-player characters, and controls any events not under any other player's control.
- At the beginning of every game session, each player is dealt 8 cards from the deck. Each player then chooses a card from their hand, and places it face down on the table. When everyone has chosen a card, all the players flip their card up. Whomever has the highest card begins that session as the Story Manager.
    - The revealed cards are then discarded. Players DO NOT draw another card.
    - Success is determined by rank then suit. Aces are Low, and suit order, highest to lowest, is Spade, Heart, Club, and Diamond.
- Story Managers determine when a scene ends and when a new scene begins. However, other players can declare the end of a scene by discarding a card.
- At the end of any scene, the Story Manager may choose relinquish her role or a player may ask the Story Manager to relinquish her role.
    - If this happens, the players each may choose a card from his or her hand and place it face down on the table.
    - When everyone has chosen a card, all the players flip their card up. Whomever has the highest card becomes the Story Manager.

- All other players, besides the new Story Manager, draw a card and all revealed cards are discarded.
- New Story Managers may not change events that occurred under previous Story Managers without the consent of all other players.

Game Mechanics

- When a character could succeed or fail at a task that affects the story, it is called a Challenge.
  - The Story Manager decides what is and is not a Challenge.
- When a character faces a Challenge, the player of that character decides whether the challenge is Extremely Easy, Very Easy, Easy, Average, Hard, Very Hard, or Extremely Hard. This is the Difficulty Rating for that Challenge.
  - The player should make the decision based on her character's traits and the character's situation.
- The player then gives the other players a chance to dispute the Difficulty Rating. If anyone disagrees with the Difficulty Rating, the disputing player must explain why.
- Should the acting player remain unconvinced, the two players each choose a card and places the card face down upon the table.
  - When they have both chosen a card, the two of them flip their cards up.
  - Whomever has the highest card decides the Difficulty Rating.
  - Success is determined by rank then suit. Aces are Low, and suit order, highest to lowest, is Spade, Heart, Club, and Diamond.
  - Both revealed cards are then discarded. If the acting player did not succeed, she draws a new card.

- The disputing player does not draw a new card.
- Difficulty Ratings cannot be disputed more than once.
- Players then roll against the Difficulty Rating for her Challenge. Players must roll equal or below her Talent Rating to succeed.
  - If the Difficulty Rating is Extremely Hard, the player rolls five dice and drops the three lowest dice.
  - If the Difficulty is Very Hard, The player rolls four dice and drops the two lowest dice.
  - If the Difficulty is Hard, The player rolls three dice and drops the lowest die.
  - If the Difficulty is Average, The player rolls two dice.
  - If the Difficulty is Easy, The player rolls three dice and drops the highest die.
  - If the Difficulty is Very Easy, The player rolls four dice and drops the two highest dice.
  - If the Difficulty is Extremely Easy, the player rolls five dice and drops the three highest dice.

Difficulty Rating	Dice Rolled	Dice Discarded
Extremely Hard	Five	Lowest Three
Very Hard	Four	Lowest Two
Hard	Three	Lowest One
Average	Two	None
Easy	Three	Highest One
Very Easy	Four	Highest Two
Extremely Easy	Five	Highest Three

- A roll of two sixes is always a failure.
- When a character fails a challenge, the player may discard any one card to make her failure into a success.

Injury & Death

- When a character fails a challenge, there is always the chance that it will result in character injury.
  - Injury does not always need to be physical. An injury can be social (shame), mental (sanity), and economic (bad credit) as well.
  - The Story Manager determines if a failure results in injury. The injury, and injury types, should make sense within the context of the story.
- When a character is injured during the game, that character loses access to one Trait with the lowest rating. Subsequent injuries cause the character to lose access to one Trait with the next lowest rating.
- At anytime during the game, a player can discard a card to heal one injury and regain use of one Trait.
- At the beginning of a new game session, and whenever there is a new Story Manager, all players heal one injury and regain the use of one Trait.
- When all of a character's Traits have been lost because of injury, the character falls unconscious or otherwise leaves the scene.
  - The character regains access to his final Trait at the beginning of the next scene.
- No primary character can be altered permanently or killed without the permission of the player who plays that character.

- Primary characters are the main characters within the story. As such, their death should be rare.
- When a player decides that her character permanently dies, that player becomes the Story Manager until the end of the session.
  - At the beginning of the next session, that player creates a new character as detailed in these rules.
- If two or more players let their characters permanently die, the game session immediately ends.

Experience & Advancement

- At the end of any given game session within an ongoing story, each player's character gains a number of experience equal to the cards she has left.
- When a character has accumulated 15 or more experience points, the player of that character may choose to improve two Traits by 1 point, to a maximum of 11.
  - Alternatively the player may choose to gain a new Trait, which starts at Trait Rating 1. She would then choose three different names for the new Trait, and allow two different fellow players mark off one name each, as was done in character creation.
- After the character has been improved, the character's experience point total is reset to 0, regardless of how many more experience points the character may have possessed.

Suggestions & Examples

While the spontaneous and rules-light nature of SYNERGY may make it *seem* like the perfect introductory game for new RPG players, sadly this is not the case. SYNERGY depends a great deal on the decision making and storytelling ability of all of the players; the simplicity and cooperative nature of the system makes the game even more dependent on the quality of the players. The best candidates for this type of game are Game Masters, seasoned players, and fiction writers. All players should be agreeable and fair minded.

Alice wanted to put together a game of SYNERGY, and decided to consider the people she usually gamed with to figure out who would be best to invite for this new game. Her friend Brian, who had introduced her to RPGs, was definitely on her short list of people to invite. Her roommate, Cathy, who had only a little experience as a RPG player, but was a great fiction writer and good natured. David was a pretty good Game Master, although he sometimes could be a bit stubborn when he was a player. Her brother Eric, on the other hand, was argumentative as a player - she knew he wouldn't work well in a SYNERGY game. She decided to invite Brian, Cathy, and David.

When choosing a setting or genre, it is important to remember that every player in your group needs to be comfortable with the setting and genre, as they each will be telling a part of the story. If you want to play in an historical setting, you need to make sure that everyone has at least a loose grasp of the place and period. If you want to play a particularly obscure genre, you need to make sure that everyone has a point of reference for that genre.

After some discussion, Alice, Brian, Cathy, and David decided that they wanted to tell a superhero story, set in Victorian England. They had debated making the story focused on political espionage and film noir in style, but Cathy didn't feel comfortable with political espionage, and David had no idea what constituted 'film noir'. The four players discussed their characters and decided that Alice, Cathy, and David would play an established superhero team, while Brian would play the stereotypical young teen who was just discovering his superpowers.

Once you have decided on a setting and genre, it is important to discuss what type of characters you will be creating and how the characters will relate to one another, as well as name, gender, appearance, social status, and history. It's highly recommended that you do this before setting your character down on paper, because these may change the decisions you will make regarding Trait descriptions. SYNGERY game rules do not go into detail about this aspect of the game, as it is largely subjective - dependent upon the type of story you will be telling, and the group you will be playing with.

They didn't want overlapping abilities, so the group discussed what kind of superheroes they wanted to play. Alice wanted to play a superhero who was fast and could fly. David was thinking about playing a flying strong-man, but decided to leave the flying part up to Alice and decided he would augment the strong-man character with tougher than normal skin. Cathy wanted to play a "kick-ass chick" inventor-detective superhero. Brian decided that his character would be a psychic with dangerously untamed powers.

When it comes to choosing Trait descriptions, there are a few different strategies you can employ. You can choose to name the three Traits in a given category something completely different. This will give your fellow players more options when they mark off one of your Traits, and give them more of a say over the type of character you create. Another strategy would be a number of synonyms to create similar Traits that are worded differently. This would allow you to keep your character focused, yet still offer a choice to your fellow players. Still yet another strategy is to do a little bit of both.

One strategy that won't work is to try to imply through your Trait description that your character "perfect" or "the best" in some manner. Even if you manage to convince your fellow players not to mark that Trait off in the elimination process, there will always be the chance of failure. In a cooperative game like SYNERGY, it can be seen as rather rude to try to game the system.

Brian wanted to give his fellow players options, but still maintain that "psychic" feel of his character. He listed "Anger Triggered Pyrokinesis," "Disorienting Future-Sense," and "Pain Retransmission" for his Mental Trait. Cathy, on the other hand, knew she wanted her character to be "kick ass." For her Social Trait, she listed, "Kick-Ass Chick," "Saucy Wench," and "Girl-Power Tomboy." David joked about possibly making one of his Physical Traits "World's Strongest Man," but when Alice gave him a withering look, he realized he better not...

You can employ some strategy when it comes to choosing which cards to play, and when to play them. If you can avoid using your highest ranking cards, you should try to save them for later in the game session. However, you should also balance this with your necessity for a particular result. Sometimes, this means that you will not get your way.

Alice wanted to begin the game as the Story Manager, so that she could properly introduce her fellow players to how the game was played. However, she knew that she might also need to throw some of her weight around if David got out of hand. When deciding who was Story Manager, she decided to play her King of Diamonds instead of her Ace of Spades. Brian, on the other hand, really wanted to be Story Manager, so he played the King of Hearts, beating Alice. Alice kicked herself for not playing her Ace, but realized that Brian was experienced enough to handle himself.

Attempts to influence the outcome in the game should never be seen punishment or used as punishment. SYNERGY gives all of the players equal influence over the game and encouragement to use that influence to their advantage. Through these systems of checks and balances, the game addresses inequity and promotes realism. It is in every player's best interest to use this system of checks and balances to the fullest, to make the story as good as it can be.

After several scenes, Cathy's character and Alice's character had both suffered a couple injuries. Cathy was also getting comfortable with SYNERGY, and wanted to try her own hand at Story Managing. At the end of the current scene, Cathy tried, and succeeded, in becoming the Story Manager, causing Alice's character and her own character to heal one injury. Brian just shrugged; he was thinking about relinquishing the Story Manager role, anyway.

A few scenes later, the four characters found themselves on a ship being attacked by the Kraken. David decided that he would grab one of the Kraken's tentacles, and pull the beast out of the water. He said that it would roll an Easy difficulty. Alice disputed this, saying that the Kraken was the size of the boat they were on, and she didn't think it was reasonable to think his character could do such a thing. David countered, arguing that his Physical Trait, "Inhuman Strength" made it reasonable. Both played their cards, and Alice won with her Ace of Spades. David grumbled that he felt she was being unfair, but Cathy backed-up Alice by explaining that this was the way the game was played, and she was just being realistic.

No one likes to see the character they play injured, and character death is even worse. However, realism and good storytelling, occasionally 'bad things' must happen. And there is more than one way for a character to be injured in SYNERGY – your pride could be wounded when jousting with words or your character could be driven insane by the sight of a creature beyond mortal comprehension. Anything can happen... but the question is whether it fits the story that you are telling.

Economic injury, for example, makes more sense when money is a big part of the story, but doesn't make sense when telling a story about alien conspiracies. Social injuries make sense in the context of a story told in the style of Jane Austin, but makes no sense in post-apocalyptic settings where survival takes precedence over social status. Even Physical injury, which is the most common type of injury, might not fit in a particular genre or setting – a comedy/cartoon based story, for example.

Character death is left completely up to the players who own the character in question. Why? The threat of death is usually what keeps players from acting as if their characters are invulnerable. However, in a game like SYNERGY, there isn't a mediating centralize authority to make sure character death doesn't becomes too common. In other role playing games, Game Masters might adjust the rules to make sure that players' characters don't die due to one bad dice roll. Instead of giving that authority to one impartial person, SYNERGY gives that decision to the most partial person of them all. And yet, it works... because in good stories, characters sometimes die, but they die only when it makes sense for the story.

> *In the story that Alice, Brian, Cathy, and David where telling, Alice's character had been the founder of their small group of superheroes. Although her character was the fastest anyone had ever seen, she chose to played her character as if age was catching up to her. The weight of her cape was beginning to feel heavier, and her eyes were less bright than in her youth. At the end of the game session, with Alice as the Story Manager, she revealed that her character was retiring after one game session. David, who had never seen this type of role playing before, asked Alice why she was retiring her character after one session. Alice simply answered that it made for a good story... and expected to be able to bring back the character as an non-primary character later on in the game. She explained that even if her character had died, she would have served a greater purpose to the story they were telling, and ultimately that was what SYNERGY was about.*

Feedback & Optional Rules

No one person is more innovative and insightful than all of us combined. SYNERGY is built on this principle, and should evolve on this principle. If you have any suggestions or ideas on how to make SYNERGY a better game, you can contact the author at www.RavenLakeGames.com. You may find your idea incorporated - and credited - in the next version of SYNERGY RPG.

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Thank you and game on!