

STORM KNIGHTS

SKILL-BASED

COMBAT

JASYN JONES



SKILL-BASED COMBAT

Game Design: Jasyn Jones

Commentary: Eric Gibson, Nick Simmonds

Playtesting: Dominick Riesland, Amber Thom, Scott Smith, John McGlynn, Bryan Bradbury, Thomas Stevens

Editing, Layout, & Graphic Design: Jasyn Jones

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most common complaints about TORG's game mechanics is known colloquially as the "Glass-Jaw Ninja" Syndrome (or GJN). It's so common, it has an entire page devoted to it in the *Revised and Expanded TORG Rulebook* (page 92). Put simply, because of the way the TORG combat mechanics work, anytime a character who is very good at defending themselves (the "ninja") is hit, they often take a lot of damage (their "Glass Jaw").

Many solutions have been proposed for this, and one even implemented in the TORG-derived *Shatterzone* and *MasterBook* games. Yet all of the solutions proposed thus far have caused far more problems

than they've solved: many revise or discard the TORG dice mechanic, altering the core of the game, most of them require extra steps during play, and some require conversion of the combat options (or other rules changes) to implement.

This article offers a simple, straightforward solution that eliminates the problem, doesn't introduce any new problems, and doesn't change the core dice mechanic of the game. This solution is transparent in play- game play isn't altered at all. The solution also enhances the cinematic feel of TORG, and enables certain subtle distinctions between characters that weren't possible before.

THE SYNDROME

TORG's combat system is designed to be quick and cinematic. It is similar to systems found in many other roleplaying games:

- The attacker's "to-hit" total (based on their attack skill) is compared to the defender's defense (based on their defense

skill) to see if the attack hit.

- The attacker's Damage Value is compared to the defender's *Toughness*, to see how much damage is done.

- The "to-hit" total is the attacker's skill plus a bonus (based on a die roll) and their Damage Value is a base value, plus the

same bonus.

TORG uses a unitary rolling method- the “to-hit” and “damage” rolls are the same roll (this is contrasted with *Dungeons & Dragons*, where the “to-hit” and damage rolls are separate). Thus, when the player rolls high, they have a higher “to-hit” total and do more damage. When they roll low, their “to-hit” total and damage are low.

When a defender has a high defense skill, attackers with low attack skills will often miss. When they do hit it will be because they rolled very well, which means they also do a lot of damage.

Example: Joe the Shocktrooper has a *Dexterity* of 8 and a *fire combat* of +1, making his attack skill a 9. Lou the Bruiser has a *Dexterity* of 8 and a *dodge* of +1, making his defense skill a 9.

Joe can hit Lou with any roll that gives him a +0 to his skill (just a little less than half the time). That means his pistol, which does 14 points of damage, will do at least 14 points of damage when he hits

Lou (and maybe more, if he rolls better).

Lou has an associate, Jimmy the Thief. Jimmy has a *Dexterity* of 8 and a *dodge* of +6, making his defense skill a 14. Joe has to get a +5 to his attack skill to hit Jimmy, which happens about 15% of the time. Usually he misses, but when he does hit, he always does at least 19 points of damage to Jimmy.

The problem is phrased in many ways and has many consequences, but for most it boils down to high-skill characters getting hit less often, but taking a lot of damage when they are. The implied solution is that highly skilled defenders should take less damage, which as a corollary means highly skilled attackers would do more damage.

Most of the solutions to the GJN syndrome implement this principle, but in ways that cause various problems. The MasterBook solution is the one official solution, and the problems it causes are numerous.

THE MASTERBOOK SOLUTION

The GJN Syndrome was enough of a problem to cause WEG to change how the dice mechanic worked in *Shatterzone* and *MasterBook*. This solution, also detailed on pg. 92 of the *Revised and Expanded TORG Rulebook*, is to ignore the rolled bonus number, and instead apply the Result



Points of the attack to the Damage Value. So if an attacker’s “to-hit” total is 3 points higher than the defender’s defense total, they add 3 points to their Damage Value.

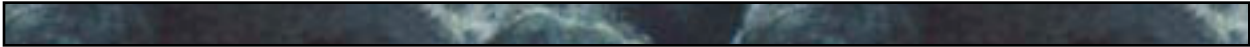
This solution caused many problems

(the *Revised and Expanded TORG Rulebook* even suggest ways to fix the fix). A few of these are discussed below.

The *MasterBook* solution (MBS) added an extra step to combat- calculating Result Points and adding them to the Damage Value. This additional step slowed down play.

The change emphasized *Dexterity* over skill, as each point of *Dexterity* added 1 point to damage for all combat skills (*pain weapons* excepted) and reduced damage from all attacks by 1 point, while each point of a skill only increased the damage of that skill.

It also made *Dexterity* into a protective attribute. Since an attack that missed did no damage at all, raising *Dexterity* in-



created the number of attacks which did no damage. It also reduced damage from all attacks that did hit by 1 point. This made *Dexterity* more valuable than *Toughness*, as *Dexterity* both increased and reduced damage (while *Toughness* only reduced it).

In TORG, characters could hit with a negative bonus, lowering the weapon's damage. Using the MBS, the minimum bonus to damage is a +0 (because negative Result Points signify a miss), meaning all

weapons never do less than their base damage. The MBS effectively raised the base damage of weapons, making combat more lethal.

To summarize: the MBS solution introduces new problems, which require more fixes, it adds extra steps during play, it makes combat more lethal, and it makes *Dexterity* more important than it already is.

Skill-based combat has none of these problems. It also enhances certain aspects of the game.

THE RULE

The Skill-Based Combat rule is simple: the attacker's Damage Value is increased by their attack skill adds and the defender's *Toughness* is increased by their defense skill adds.

Example: Using this system, Joe the Shocktrooper does 15 points of damage with his pistol (the pistol's base Damage Value of 14 plus 1 point for his 1 add in *fire combat*). When he hits Lou the Thug, Lou takes 14 points of damage (because his 1 point of *dodge* reduces the damage from 15 to 14).

When Joe is shooting Jimmy the Thief he needs a +5 to get past Jimmy's defense skill value, making his Damage Value a 20. Jimmy only takes 14 points of damage, though, because he has 6 adds in *dodge*. If Joe had rolled that same +5 against Lou, Lou would have taken 19 points of damage.

Stated more formally, the rule is:

1. Characters who attack add their skill adds in the appropriate attacking skill to the Damage Value of their weapon. (For weapons with a Max. Damage, this can exceed the Max. of the weapon.)

2. Characters who are defending (passive or active) add their skill adds in the

appropriate defensive skill to *Toughness*.

This rule only applies to combat skills:

- *Biotech Weapons*
- *Energy Weapons*
- *Heavy Weapons*
- *Fire Combat*
- *Unarmed Combat*
- *Melee Weapons*
- *Missile Weapons*
- *Dodge*
- *Pain Weapons* (see the "Pain Weapons" sidebar, pg. 5)

No other changes to current rules or combat options are necessary. The "Specializations in Play" sidebar (pg. 4) highlights one example.

Skill-Based Combat in Play

One of the strengths of the skill-based combat rule is that it doesn't alter gameplay at all. Rolling dice, generating Bonus Numbers, and so forth- no extra steps are needed and no steps are changed or revised.

The rule is simple. It is easy to explain and easy to implement. The skill adds of the character do modify the Damage Values of their weapons and their *Toughness*,

CINEMATIC FEATS

Movies and stories are replete with examples of characters who kill using weapons that, in *Torg* terms, do very little damage. Ninjas are especially known for being able to use nearly anything to bring down their prey.

The current rules reflect such situations only with difficulty. If he is to succeed, the player must expend enough cards, Possibilities, and so forth to ensure that the Bonus Number is high enough to cause the requisite damage.

Using the skill-based damage system, a character who is extremely skilled can become lethal with common implements, even those with low Damage Values. Yet, skilled combatants are still able to protect themselves, escaping certain death.

This, too, is cinematic. In many movies, a skilled defender is shown knocking away a projectile, trapping it between their palms, or taking the blow in a shoulder or other non-critical area, when other opponents of the same attacker have been instantly slain.

yet these calculations needn't occur during play.

Rather, the player (or gamemaster) records the modified values on their character sheet and refers to those rather than the original values.

Example: A Storm Knight with *Toughness* 10, *Strength* 10, 2 adds in *dodge*, 3 adds in *melee weapons*, and who uses a short sword (Damage Value Str +4) would record the following values:

Toughness 10

dodge +2/12

melee weapons +3/13

Short Sword, DV Str +4: 14, *melee weapons* +3: DV 17

By recording these values on the character sheet, the rule is implemented transparently. Play proceeds exactly as under the current system and no new mechanics need be learned, nor do any new steps slow combat down.

Game Balance

This rule directly implements the desired solution: defenders with higher skill values take less damage and attackers with higher skill values do more damage. Only combat is affected, the die rolling mechanic of TORG and other core mechanics remain unaltered.

In general, this rule de-emphasizes *Dexterity* and emphasizes skills. In TORG, skills cost fewer Possibilities to improve than attributes. Even so, there was a point beyond which it was more effective to raise the attribute (which also raised all the skills based on it) than to increase the skills individually.

Using this rule, skills are more important in combat- offensive skills cause damage and defensive skills protect from damage. Raising *Dexterity* doesn't offer either of these benefits. This makes these skills relatively more valuable and *Dexterity* relatively less valuable.

This also has the effect of increasing the seriousness of *unskilled* results. As skills increase damage or protect from damage,

SPECIALIZATIONS IN PLAY

Skill specialization is an optional rule, found on ppg. 34-35 of the *Revised and Expanded Torg Rulebook*. Skill-based combat works just as easily using those rules.

A character with a *fire combat* of +2 and a .38 caliber revolver (Damage Value 14) does 16 points of damage. If they take a Type Specialization in pistols, they have +2 *fire combat* adds for all firearms and +3 adds just for pistols, making their .38 caliber damage 17.

If they choose just a Trademark Specialization with "my father's .38 caliber service revolver", they have +4 adds with that revolver and do a base of 18 points of damage.

If they take both Specializations, they have: +2 *fire combat* adds for all firearms, +3 for pistols, and +5 for "my father's .38 caliber service revolver", making its base damage a 19.

PAIN WEAPONS

Tharkoldu pain weapons (see the *Tharkold Sourcebook*, ppg. 45, 121, and 127) use *melee weapons* or *unarmed combat* to hit, but the Damage Value of the weapon is the user's *pain weapons* skill, compared against the target's *Spirit* or *pain weapons*. The Result Points are read as spiritual stun damage, with spiritual consequences (such as the target losing use of their *faith* or *focus* skills).

Under this rule, pain weapons work exactly the same way they do now- *melee weapons* or *unarmed combat* are used to see if the attack hits, but adds in either do not increase the Damage Value of the weapon. In this case, the knowledge of how to cause or avert damage from a pain weapon doesn't lie in physical combat (*melee weapons* or *unarmed combat*) but how the pain energy is channeled (*pain weapons*).

becoming *unskilled* strips a character of those tools. This may have the effect of encouraging Non-Combat Interactions, especially against highly-skilled opponents.

One of the issues of concern with the various GJN solutions is that of combat balance. The *MasterBook* solution was believed to offer the opportunity for greatly increasing damage, far beyond what was reasonable (hence the need for the "fix to the fix" in the *Revised and Expanded TORC Rulebook*.)

Using the rule suggested herein, the increased damage available to those with high attack skills is matched with the increased protection available to those with high defense skills. When characters have skills of equal adds, the damage is identical to that done under the current rules. When the attacker has more adds, he does more. When the defender has more adds, he takes less. Balance between the two isn't an issue.

However, gamemasters need to be aware that this rule does narrow the range of comparably skilled opponents. As skill

matters more in combat, differences in relative skill levels matter more. Highly skilled attackers are more effective against less skilled opponents.

Example: If Character A (Adam), has 2 more *fire combat* adds than character B (Bob) has *dodge* adds, then Adam will do, on average, 2 more points of damage on an attack.

Likewise, if Bob's *fire combat* is 2 points lower than Adam's *dodge*, he will do, on average, 2 points less on an attack. This gives Adam a big advantage over Bob.

The implied solution to the GJN syndrome is to have skill matter more in combat. Most of the GJN solutions, including the *MasterBook* Solution, implemented

CINEMATIC OR REALISTIC?

Skill-based combat passes the believability test for most people. It makes sense that a person who is more skilled with a sword does more damage than one who is less skilled, while one who is a virtuoso with a blade takes less damage than an inept amateur. Not only does this seem believable, it is also highly cinematic. This rule is cinematic in other ways.

In *Torg*, skills are attribute plus adds, so a character with a high attribute (natural talent) but little training (few skill adds) is indistinguishable from one who has less natural talent but more training- the two are equally matched. Yet, in the cinematic movies that are *Torg's* inspiration, this isn't the case. We frequently see a weaker, but better trained individual defeat stronger, but less well trained opponents.

Under these rules, a tough but raw fighter would have high *Dexterity* and *Strength* values, and so land blows fairly often and with some force. A character who is weaker and less agile, but more skilled, could still defeat the brawler as he knows how to evade the brawler's inexperienced swings and knows exactly where to strike for maximum effect.

Judged by these criteria, skill-based combat is both realistic and cinematic.

SKILL-BASED COMBAT AND SUPER SKILL

Most existing weapons and powers work well with the skill-based combat rules. One exception is the **super skill** Pulp Power.

Characters who chose this power can rapidly gain a huge number of adds in any combat skill, which would allow them to increase their base damage to incredible levels. Gamemasters who use the skill-based combat system should disallow this power or reduce its utility.

A variant **super skill** power is presented below. It operates like Skill Specialization (ppg. 34-35 in *The Revised and Expanded Torg Rulebook*), but doesn't require the character to specialize. As **super skill** can prove unbalancing under the default *Torg* combat system, gamemasters might consider adopting this version of the power even if they don't use the skill-based combat rules.

Super Skill

Adventure Cost: None

Value: None

Range: Self

Tech Rating: 26; Gizmos/gadgets cannot have this power.

Ritual DN: 14

For a one-time cost of 3 possibilities, characters that purchase this power gain +3 extra adds to place into one skill. The adds are increased for the purposes of using the skill, but not for buying future adds. This power may increase the skill's starting adds beyond the +2/+3 maximum. **Super skill** may be purchased for more than one skill.

When **Super Skill** is taken as a Pulp Sorcery ritual, the adventure cost is paid for only once.

this principle and all of them affect the balance between combatants of differing skill levels.

This isn't a drawback or a problem- it's the point of the rule, the result that was requested. People wanted skill to matter more, so differences in skill matter more and gamemasters need to keep this in mind when designing opponents.

The Fire Combat Skill

There is a good case to be made that

the *TORG fire combat* skill is unbalanced. Certainly, it's the strongest skill in the game. It covers a wide variety of weapons, which weapons do respectable amounts of damage and have decent ranges, the skill is native in every cosm except the Living Land, fire arms of one variety or another are natively available in every cosm except the Living Land, and as combat is frequent, *fire combat* is used as often or more often than nearly any other skill, save perhaps *dodge*.

Gamemasters who implement the skill-based combat rules need be aware that, as combat skills are of increased importance, *fire combat* is of increased importance. If it was unbalanced, or close to it before, it may become so under this rule.

Gamemasters who implement this rule are encouraged to consider making *fire combat* a limited skill (like *scholar* or *science*), such that instead of taking adds in *fire combat* and being able to shoot weapons of all varieties (and increase damage in all of them), characters are forced to choose between pistols, rifles, SMG's, and so forth. This makes the skill more expensive, bringing it back into balance. The Villain Approved Action rules, also available on the STORM KNIGHTS site, might help as well.

Conclusion

Previous solutions to the GJN syndrome typically required extra steps in play, some changed the die rolling mechanic (which changes how spells and miracles and other parts of the game work), and many introduced problems little different from the GJN syndrome itself.

Skill-based combat fixes the GJN syndrome without any of the above difficulties. In terms of balance, the changes skill-based combat introduces are positive ones. It also adds cinematic and realistic



verisimilitude and preserves the fast-paced TORC combat system. Of all the solutions to the GJN syndrome presented thus far,

this rule seems the most straightforward and the most effective.

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