

PRODUCT: The Basic System, A Role-Playing Game System for those who like things easy!  
AUTHOR: J. Parker  
COMPANY: Dilly Green Bean Games

STYLE: 4  
SUBSTANCE: 3

SUMMARY:

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A fast and easy to use house system by Maine-based indie publisher DGBG. Not original, but solid. Parts of it read like a simplified, cleaned up version of Palladium or D&D. It's a bridge system portions of which can be combined with Fuzion almost seamlessly.  
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REVIEW:

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Maine-based publisher Dilly Green Bean Games (hereafter, DGBG) has now presented their new independent house system of rules. This is a set of rules that has been made available as a typical free PDF document on DGBG's website, and it is the company's first official move towards establishing a house system independent from Fuzion or any other previous, licensed rules framework that they might be working with. Author J. Parker has announced a new core rulebook for a superhero cosmos of his own devising, "Guardian Universe Core," which was written and developed entirely for Fuzion. Yet there is now a preview file on RPGNow that serves as an introduction to the full Guardian Universe scheduled for book release in 2004. The preview is written for The Basic System (TBS), and bears no references to the Fuzion system. It is available in PDF and has come to be known as GUK, for Guardian Universe Kamikaze Edition, which is actually a full 136-page book, and a real treat to read. Like that, the company offers part of the Guardian Universe cosmos as the first official background to be used with their own rules system, while the bigger core book, under the current plans, will still come out for Fuzion next spring or summer.

If you know that certain bit of prehistory to TBS, you will understand that it is hardly avoidable for a reviewer who is also familiar with the history to not compare TBS to Fuzion in one way or another. Still, Parker's TBS is a rules engine that can, and should, be used entirely on its own, and is trying to achieve a few things that Fuzion is not. The PDF containing the current TBS rules starts with a headline screaming out "A Role-Playing Game System for those who like things easy!" and, in this review, I will constantly strive to attempt to illustrate how the valid this claim is. After all, most of us will have heard of several so-called "easy" universal systems out there, and it is going to be especially interesting to find out how easy TBS really is. I am also going to base my verdict on TBS on a few other points, as you can determine later.

First of all, TBS does not bother much with any long-winded chapter dealing with the questions "What is an RPG?", "What is a character?", "What is the job of the GM?" and so on, the kind of generic introduction that you have probably seen before. In general you cannot fight the impression that the author assumes he is writing mainly for an audience of people who have read several other RPG rules systems before, especially the better known ones. This does not distract much from the content of his text, though. Most of this rules text is really well organized and partitioned. Short, simple sentences are used throughout, and figuring out the required game stats takes only minimal mathematical effort. The file also makes extensive use of highlighting in the form of bold print, charts and boxed text. The number of available base points for character generation and the explanation (a full explanation at that!) of the seven attributes in TBS, called Main Stats, are given on the second page of the PDF, that is, the first page after the title page. This ensures that everybody is drawn right into the midst of things, and not weighed down by any kind of preface or theory. Since TBS is an attempt at writing a complete, but simple basic rules set for any genre or historical period, the reader is also not slowed down by having to read a study of the game world before everything else. The organization of the

seven Main Stats and the very way how you are supposed to roll them up makes one think that TBS is mainly trying to offer a cleared up, streamlined version of D&D3, with bits from Fuzion, Hero, and Palladium. In essence, you roll the familiar 3D6 for each of the Stats, and write down the number rolled, as well as a Main Stat Bonus (MSB) equal to the number of points you got above “10” in each. Any number you get lower than 10 on 3D6 will effectively give you a Main Stat Negative (MSN), and any number of 11 and higher will give you a Main Stat Bonus (MSB).

As a consequence, if you have the average result of 10 you get exactly +0. The MSB/MSN will play a big part in skill resolution and other game math later on (as if we didn’t expect that!). Having read Fuzion before, as well as BESM and comparable systems, this particular idea in TBS is of course neither novel nor particularly simple. If you want to select the option of a “Point-Based Game” for your campaign with TBS instead of just rolling dice for the primary stats, you get a pool of additional points to add to the base number of 10, or to a rolled result. Yet this rule could have been better defined. This is a bit in the rules text that appears to have been written more than others for experienced gamers and for people who are somewhat familiar with the way how rules chapters are usually written, and broken down into sections.

Like the Fuzion system before it, this new set of rules gives you recommended standard point pools dependent on the kind of world you want to play in, as a default. For starters, there is now a total of four world levels: Real World, Action World (as in Hollywood action movies), Super World, and finally, Godly World. As you can find out from several bits in the same document, as well as from the GUK book, the author is determined to support mainly a Real World type of campaign himself, but there is enough info in TBS to play at the higher three levels almost without effort. You simply increase all the stat values accordingly. Nothing too dramatic about that. The selection of the Main Stats indicates that this may all well be Hero, or RuneQuest or D&D, if not for the lack of a “beauty” stat. The others are definitely the usual suspects to a long-time gamer: Intelligence, Willpower, Charisma, Agility, Strength, Endurance, and Speed. In a move challenging the claim for simplicity somewhat, we are then given a total of eight derivative values in addition to the main stats. Those are called the Secondary Stats. Since they are figured out by multiplying a Main Stat by 2, or adding two different MSBs, for example, you can tell that this section still follows the mold of Fuzion and others very much. TBS is not exactly reinventing the wheel. That much is for sure. So far, the Main and Secondary Stats also do not “do” anything dramatically different from other established rules systems, and even their names sound very familiar.

The next big step is a list of the Natural Abilities (which work parallel to Fuzion’s Talents or GURPS’s Advantages for the most part). However, in TBS, you only get a box of nine Natural Abilities to choose from. Those abilities are just game effects that you either have or don’t have, do not increase with experience, and usually provide a one-time permanent bonus to something. Also, it might be important to stress that in TBS, the height of your rolled up seven Main Stats directly determines your chance at getting any Natural Ability during char-gen. This smacks a great deal more of old-school D&D and the like than of a streamlined point-allocation system. So, let’s just say that TBS comes across as a blend of roll-up system and point-allocation system, shall we?

The Natural Abilities actually chosen for the chart in the core rules text are a haphazard selection of adventurer benefits (such as marksmanship, speed-reading or heightened senses, etc.) which have long been established in other games and also correspond quite well to Talents in Fuzion Core, for example. This list could also be easily expanded, and probably the author just wanted to save space. I leave it up to others to discuss which abilities should best be “skills”, “talents”, “modifiers” or one-time bonuses, can be or cannot be learned, change over time, and so forth, since I easily tire of those discussions. The consensus followed by TBS is still that something like Ambidexterity, Speed-Reading or a Photographic Memory is not a skill, but a benefit, basically innate. Your character is either born with it or they are not. Natural Abilities can greatly influence your character’s performance in dangerous situations. Later in his rules text, the author also claims that Natural Abilities is the category to which almost any D&D3 “Feat” can be added in a conversion.

Also, following tried and true roleplaying game conventions, next on the list are the Skills. TBS distinguishes between Common Skills, meaning stuff that everyone in the campaign world knows how to do a little bit and hence start at a free default level anyway, and, well, the rather uncommon ones.

Other than that, all skills are figured out the same way (which is always a plus to me in every system I use) and cost the same number of points.

Task resolution in TBS is a piece of cake, but again, really not different from the RPG systems that most people around the globe are using these days. The core mechanics of TBS are indeed quite smoothly running and easy to remember, but so far they lack originality. If a system like this hits the market and turns out so very similar to another system that we already know, the inevitable question will be whether or not people will see it as plagiarism, and another inevitable question will be why the authors have gone to the trouble of writing it from scratch if it really doesn't have anything new to offer. The second question is one that I dare answer: For the most part, at this point, it has to do with the licensing rights. DGBG is a small outfit still, founded by two people only about a year ago. They want to keep their options open as to licensing another rules framework, like Fuzion from R.Talsorian Games, or anything else that they may have to pay "royalties" for. It cannot hurt a small new company to have their own in-house rules for follow-up books and games, as well as a marketable "cross-over, multi-genre" system that can be used as a platform by outside writers, and licensed out to other parties later. That is why they have released TBS. The task resolution as such works like this: You take the MSB or MSN in the relevant stat, add it to the level you have in a skill, and add the result of 1D20. The total has to meet or beat a difficulty number. The higher you roll the better. As in its predecessor systems, a skill is basically assigned to one Main Stat only. The combination of Stat and Skill is definitive, and permanent. You always have to use the same Main Stat Bonus with the Skill, which makes the initial Main Stats reasonably powerful. However, Agility and Intelligence are used most often, and three out of the seven Main Stats are not used with Skills, at all. Some skills may be added to either of two Main Stat Bonuses, but the GM evidently has to determine which one it is in advance.

Additional things that flesh out a character are summed up under a section called "The Extras". Again, these add-ons are pretty much optional and they are patterned on GURPS Advantages, in case you know those. However, TBS Extras are the kind of benefits that are not really inborn abilities, but more like things that express how wealthy or how well-connected the guy is. In the basic version of TBS (probably to be expanded later in supplements), you just roll an 8-sided die to check which Extras your player-character has. To distinguish them from Skills and Natural Abilities, you use the die roll there, and do not spend points on them during character generation, yet you may do that later when you have earned Experience Points.

The full core system and character generation is indeed explained adequately on the first six pages of the (currently) 44-page PDF. Judging the system on the criterion whether you can use it right away, provided that you have players and blank character sheets, you will have to give it a high rating. Also, what makes me feel sympathetic to TBS is that the PDF does look cleverly organized and clean – no fine print that is harmful to your eyesight, no four-columns on one page with a dark grey-shade background, no columns and passages crammed full of abbreviations that you have to be an expert to read, no sidebars or footnotes – everything is actually printed in easy-to-read paragraphs with centred headlines. This also makes me hand the file a plus in the Style category. The file is further embellished by a few anonymous pieces of royalty-free web art (E.g., a guy in a lab coat looking into a microscope, a bunch of warriors with pole-arms, a sword, a van, a motorcycle, etc. You get the idea.) The lay-out is far from spectacular, but it's unobtrusive. By the way, the TBS character sheet was missing from the rules PDF, but is available separately on the DGBG site.

The next few pages of the document are filled with rough notes for the usage of armor, hand-to-hand weapons, modern firearms, and also, vehicles. All the weapons normally cause a number of D6 as damage. That damage is read against the armor protection of the target, and subtracted from a pool of "hit points" if it goes over the armor. You might find it interesting to note that all standard Armor in this system is treated as ablative, i.e., is wearing down over time as it takes more and more hits that exceed its armor value. Simplicity in TBS does not necessarily equal using only one type of dice – the main resolution die is 1D20, and you take its result plus bonuses. You always use a single D20, never more than one D20 at once. D6s are used for damage, and other dice are used occasionally to roll up effects, modifiers and some such. The system lists D10, D8, and D4, and at the start also mentions a D12, but no D12 is used for anything in the present version of the rules. The different dice are kept separate, and are never added in any context anywhere in the rules. The six-sided dice are the only

dice in the game that you roll multiples of so far, and add the results together. So, just in case anybody was wondering: There is no such thing as  $1D6+1D4$  in TBS, or, worse even,  $(2D8+3D4+2) \times 1D10+1$ , etc.

There are several significant portions in the PDF text that make you think that J. Parker was mainly trying to write a simplified, user-friendly form of the well-known d20 system by WOTC/Hasbro. It is a laudable endeavour, and also really admirable in my opinion, that Parker has provided usable, playable rules that indeed plug into any genre (except maybe sub-culture ones like *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *Nobilis*, *Sorcerer*, *BESM*, or any extreme high-magic world) in a format of just over 10 pages – again, this includes illustrations and broad white rims on the page – while the “other” d20 system requires the customer to buy at least 5 volumes of 200+ pages each, plus adventures and God-knows-what.

The Vehicle Rules contained in TBS are actually very thin and might not please readers who may have been looking for a vehicle sourcebook, or chase rules. The Vehicle Rules in this case are merely a simple table that gives the reader an overview of some standard modern vehicles’ relevant game info: their weight, the max number of passengers, the max speed, armor value and their vehicular hit points. The column for cost is intentionally left blank for the GM, as far as I can see. All the modern vehicles listed also inflict a penalty to the driver’s Agility stat. This represents a rather hidden, but explicit departure from Fuzion, where a character’s Driving ability is based directly on a stat that stands for dexterity or reflexes, let alone Palladium’s Rifts where futuristic robot suits add hefty bonuses to attacking and parrying abilities, as well. It also makes standard driving skill checks rather hard compared to others. Since the bulkiness of a car or truck subtracts directly from Agility, my impression is that this works almost opposite to Fuzion, where you just add Stat and Skill and do not have to worry about the circumstances of sitting in a vehicle very much. Unfortunately, the wording in the text about the very rule that deals with the penalty to Agility could be a bit clearer. It is easy to get confused over whether the penalty number is supposed to be subtracted from the Agility score, from the Agility Main Stat Bonus, or is the maximum value that the driver’s Agility Main Stat Bonus can be. I think the author intended the latter, but this came across as a bit fluffy. I could not tell for sure at first. There are no rules or hints whatsoever for building your own customized vehicles, and no section on car chases, dogfights, and all that. Either those were cut due to space restrictions, or may be developed from the ground up for a later supplement. I think a problem comes in at the beginning of the Vehicle paragraph because the writer is telling us that if we know vehicle rules from another system, we should go ahead and use them in conjunction with TBS. That is supposed to sound open-minded and encourage freestyle mixing and matching by the GM, but every so often, an invitation like that is likely to opening the floodgates to a great deal of confusion at the gaming table. Let me see whether I got this thing figured out for a change: If the author of the rules PDF encourages me to use vehicle stuff from another game, by another publisher (let’s say, *GURPS Autoduel*), is that not equivalent to pleading guilty of forgetting to include usable vehicle rules, or admitting that you did not care for detailed vehicular combat rules? And who can guarantee me that rules and modifiers taken from another game book, which may have been written under different circumstances, with different premises altogether, are not going to cause a lot of trouble – playing havoc with what little info I have for TBS?

There are two lines on the page for Vehicle Rules that hint at vehicular weapons and possible extras, but they have yet to make an appearance. They must be optional elements. Maybe we will still get to see them in the GUK book or in future updates for TBS. That is something I can only speculate on at this point. There are also no entries for small airplanes, fighter jets, gliders or any fantasy world vehicles like horse-drawn carts. Those would probably have been beyond the scope of J. Parker’s quick introductory file.

Let’s focus on what is actually in TBS: We get rather detailed random roll tables for hit locations on vehicles and on people. All are instantly understood, but they seem to go against the grain of a system that wants to be super-simple. A really easy beginner’s system should easily do without hit locations. We could jump right back to the old Hero System or GURPS-style convention that if you intend to speed up combat resolution, you do not use hit locations at all, and “all hits are assumed to be torso hits”. I know that it has worked for me, and befits an easy system, yet TBS does not mention it

explicitly. TBS could also simplify, or “fold down” its distinction between “stun damage” and “lethal damage”. But since I myself used the latter distinction when I last ran something with Fuzion, I am not going to be overly critical of it in TBS. I just know that some impatient players who want combat to progress super-swiftly will not like the distinction of two different point pools. As a small side-note, the text in the section about taking damage does not tell us whether or not the Damage Modifiers in the chart apply to both stunning damage and killing damage. So what am I supposed to do with them? It might be a nitpick; in any case it is not something that I actually have a problem with, or that is breaking the combat system. Not at all.

As far as the hit point system is concerned, it is very traditional, more so than I first expected, with the following specifics: All characters reach a state of unconsciousness and/or ineffectiveness at zero hit points, and all are dead at -10 hit points. So, strictly speaking there is no additional benefit to a high Endurance value, from which hit points are calculated, after reaching zero. (As a reminder, in Fuzion, for which J. Parker is also writing supplements, characters can take their relevant “health” stat several times into the negatives. TBS goes another route.) The Knockout Rules that are presented on the very next page make sense, but they also mean an added element of complexity. On a second thought, I might use them for simulating a boxing match between characters. For those who are interested, there is a typo in that paragraph, as well: Correctly, the last sentences in the first paragraph should read “If he had rolled anything lower than an 8 (not 6!), he could still be standing.  $1d20 + \text{damage over Stun Points} = \text{END save difficulty level}.$ ” It is just a bit unfortunate that small beginner’s inconsistencies seem to have crept into the rules text. The charts and the text mention an abbreviation called “SP,” but here SP can variously stand for “Stun Points” and for “Skill Points” depending on the context. These are the kind of slips that I am sure can be cleared from an updated version of TBS.

The next section gives me more cause for alarm. Here the reader is presented with something I can honestly criticize: “The Character Class.”

This whole section only makes sense in light of the fact that TBS is making an effort to be a “bridging system”, or a system that wants to cater to people who have previously played an established classes-and-levels RPG and wants them to make an easy transition. My question is just, in its short form, Why is that necessary?

The wording used by Parker is rather odd. For example, “Most RPGs have character classes or templates.” Yeah, but ...so what? I could list about a dozen games that I have enjoyed over the years that play extraordinarily well without the notion of “class” or “level.” And why should TBS want to give you hints that this is encouraged only because at one point or other, in a specific genre or a specific segment of the market, this is seen as the industry standard? Sometimes character professions and templates can indeed be enormously helpful as a quick reference especially for new and inexperienced players, but that is not even the topic of TBS at this point. The document just lists a few D&D-style conventions about distinguishing fighter professions, intellectuals, and traders/bard-like types as a third category. TBS calls its categories Combat Class, Thought Class, and Trade Class. According to the PDF, these only differ in the type of die rolled for their hit point increase per level. This is actually a greater limit, and a greater degree of determination than in other classes-and-levels games that I have seen. In Palladium’s games, for example, all characters add a flat +1D6 to their hit point total whenever they go up a level. This is the same for all no matter which “class” they may belong to. In TBS, which tried to spice things up a bit in some areas, a dedicated all-purpose “Fighter” type might still start out with a much lower initial Endurance stat, hence have a lower hit point pool, and when he goes up from first to second level he might, just for example, roll a “2” on his assigned 1D10, building up hit precious hit points more slowly than a Priest who rolled a “4” on 1D4, or a secret agent who rolled an “8” on his 1D8. What makes this section so wishy-washy to me is that it does mention a few typical character professions in a simple listing, but actual Character Class descriptions do not follow! TBS has no chapter about Character Classes. So, I can only guess that this is supposed to be a GM tool that encourages me as a GM to start building classes from my own notes, or snatch character classes from another game book I may be using. That is the only way to explain the whole classes business in TBS at this point. It is adding to the confusion rather than solving it. Why should I even bother about character classes then? By the way, as far as the level issue is concerned, your beginning level is Zero, not “First Level.” To move up levels, all point thresholds have been completely streamlined. All characters need the same amount of experience points to move up one level, in case those are used at all: 1000 XP to go from Level 0 to Level 1, 2000 XP to go from Level 1

to Level 2, 3000 XP to go from Level 2 to Level 3, and so on, open-ended.

If you are a GM using TBS as a bridge system or a plug-in in combination with something else, you might avoid the classes-and-levels section altogether. This seems highly preferable, since the Levels system presented above is cumbersome and also awards characters with a high Main Stat Bonus in Intelligence (INT) throughout the game, whereas characters with a Main Stat value in INT of 10 or less will always get fewer benefits per level.

What makes this chapter even more curious is that TBS offers no clear guidelines for Experience Points, and hence, character advancement. One of the features of TBS that can easily be misread as a fault is that it is striving to please many camps, many different parties out there, by offering the chance to plug in your previous conventions found in another game system. As an example, the definitions on page 15 of the PDF include the recommendation that in case you are planning to use TBS as the core rules engine for a published “setting from another system” (whatever that may be), you ought to “use that system’s Experience Points system.” Excuse me, but what if I absolutely want to avoid just that? What if I am looking for a new waterproof system? What if I am aiming to combine, blend, and alter the Experience sections of two or more systems? TBS, taken at face value, offers me no guidelines on that. I feel a bit left in the dark there, and that is unpleasant. As an experienced gamer, I actually know exactly what I want, what is my fare and what is going to save me time and headaches in gaming. But as a reviewer, I have to think about the usability of a text to other people in the hobby. What if a really new beginner were to pick up TBS and read it as his first system, looking for a complete and consistent rules booklet? – This is something I still do not get. While the text of TBS says that I should divide a slain foe’s or monster’s total hit points by 2 and use the result directly as XP, it also recommends handing out XP for extraordinary actions the character has done, XP for teamwork, clever roleplaying (the acting award, as I call it). In closing, Parker put in another line in boldface that literally says, “You can pretty much hand out XP for anything. It’s always up to the GM.” Again, this is one of the bits in Parker’s system that is well-intentioned, but it suffers in my eyes because it is not definitive enough for a newbie (“Am I supposed to always halve the opponent’s hit points to figure out XP?”, “Do you really have to kill the foe to cash the XP?”, “Are the other things that I can award points for really options? May I combine them with XP for slain foes or not? May I use two or three of those options in the same game, or should I pick one of them?”). Furthermore, I am suspicious and critical of it because it could have been mentioned before the clumsy “Character Class” paragraph, like other rulebooks do it, and it is not expressing anything new and interesting about roleplaying. In any case, I claim that there should have been a paragraph in this PDF that states more clearly that TBS can be used with either of two main options: Class-based and Point-based. That circumvents most of the impending confusion that might arise from the following few pages.

TBS also does not undertake much of a gamble when determining how you spend the XP earned. Since the Main Stats are so influential, they are clearly more expensive to raise than Skills. Unfortunately the PDF was originally plagued by a typo in the bit that was supposed to explain very swiftly how that works. I checked with the writer in the meantime, and just to be fair, I have to include the clarification here that indeed the intended rule was that you should only be able to increase a Main Stat by one level at a time, going from 11 to 12, then from 12 to 13, from 13 to 14, etc. You will typically have to save up a number of about a few hundred XP at the very least under TBS’ own Experience Point system before you start spending them. Once you have a few hundred points saved up, you are indeed free to allocate them to Main Stats, Skills, Natural Abilities or Extras. You may want to note that the system does not allow you to increase anything from the Secondary Stats section with XP, like Hit Points, or increase any MSBs directly. There is also nothing said about purchasing items, artefacts, vehicles or mounts with XP, or converting XP to money, which may add a nice touch to the usual “character growth and development.” Still, this Experience system is far more liberal than some earlier ones I have seen over the years. To me, it looks better than some where the initially rolled stat numbers determined how much you could still increase your stats later, or your character class influenced that somewhat, or you could only increase some attributes, but not the rest, or an attribute/stat could be increased by a certain max, like +2, and then never again after that. TBS is a quick and a liberal system to me since it allows a player to train up their character’s Main Stats as well as Skills. Talking about increasing Stats, I cannot directly discern from the rules text whether or not J. Parker intended a definite human limit of the Main Stats. Since you roll 3D6 at the start, it could be

that 18 is the maximum that a normal human being can have, but there is no rule in there yet that tells me that I cannot use my XP later to buy it up to 19 and 20 and beyond. (The present version of the PDF also includes various options for really powerful superheroes that transcend 20 and even 30 in their Stats, so I assume you can increase “indefinitely.” The GUK book by the same author also offers a modified roll-up system, leading to higher starting Stat values.) Unless using your own modifications, the method of dispensing Experience also goes for any TBS game no matter whether you are coming from the classes-and-levels or the point-based perspective.

Catering to the anime and superhero games lovers next, TBS is presenting quick reference notes on running Giant- or Medium-sized anime robots. Those are only a few lines of text each, and only concern a few stat values, but they are clearer than other sections in this file, and even permit running Giant and Medium Robots as player-characters. A complete “build your own mecha” system is not given – the robot stats are merely a conversion of the basic, aforementioned human stats. They get higher Strength and Armor, and that is really about it, pretty much. I cannot state whether this is either good or bad, and I do not want to pass judgment on that very section just yet, but I tend to see the “robot rules” in a rather favourable light because they show that Parker has thought about many genres and conventions beforehand, and has tried to trim the info on diverse things down to the bare essentials, from combat to armor to modern weapons to cars, and even fantastic abilities and mecha-like vehicles or living robots. Due to the aforementioned lack of space, the PDF does not bother with stated out examples. I bet the writer wants to leave that to future expansions and a book version, if anything.

Interestingly, the PDF originally stopped at the robot rules page. That was all you got. The updated file meanwhile has added Skill benchmarks and explanations of super-high stat values for superheroic characters, and a whole chapter of defined super-abilities to go along with those, à la Champions. There is a long alphabetical listing of your typical comicbook superhero abilities, which work independently of Skills and Natural Abilities. The list ties in nicely with the well-prepared superhero material that is already available in Parker’s GUK, and defines powers in TBS terms, from Alter Body to Combat Rage (that’s like the Hulk’s rages), to Dimensional Gate, to Flight and Hyper Movement or Vibration Manipulation. Most powers are static, and sharply defined, but they can in fact be bought up in levels – independently of a character’s overall “Level” in case the campaign is using that. To clear up any confusion over game terminology here, a power’s level is *NEVER* the same as a character level. As a matter of fact, any and all superpowers in TBS are bought with points from a separate point pool (appropriately established as, PP = Power Points). That point pool is technically based upon your character’s Main Stat Bonus in Endurance, equivalent to other systems’ “constitution” or “health” stat. So if you do not have an MSB in Endurance to begin with, or only one at +1, you won’t be able to purchase fanciful comicbook powers. Healthier characters will have more choices in those abilities, yet it must certainly be a GM decision whether superpowers will be used at all. One of the few details that could cause problems in the long run is that while most specifics of the superpowers are given a numerical limit, the duration is always “GM’s call,” without any further explanation. For an experienced gamer, again, this is not much of a problem, really, but it could lead to ugly discussions with rules lawyers. While a lightning bolt or a movement power (Flight, Tunnelling, Teleport) is instantaneous and does not often involve the element of a prolonged duration, players will inevitably want to know how long some other power effects last: Is the Armor ability always on? Can I increase the armor value within one second? How much time will pass before my darkness field dissolves again? Is there a limit to how long I can use my Flight or Underwater Breathing?

Those are the kind of questions that every TBS game master is going to have to answer for his own game sessions at home. Once that is accepted, I might add that personally, I think that not giving definitive numbers for range and duration, or especially for duration, is a good move. If I were to decide that I really wanted to run a full-scale superhero campaign with TBS, I would say that armor is “always on” unless an opponent has a power that can directly decrease or switch off armor. Also, my reasoning would dictate that a movement can be used indefinitely as long as the hero is not grievously hurt or knocked out. The latter also goes for Shape-Changing or Chameleon abilities, and lastly, most powers like Beast Form or Combat Rage would last for a bunch of hours, maybe 1D4 or 1D6 hours if someone asked me. But those are just random thoughts I would like to throw into the discussion. I am not sure whether J. Parker and his colleagues would agree with me.

Many players who come from the more restrictive systems or may have more of a mathematical approach to RPGs are going to want to know about the limits of powers for sure. Some power definitions are also a tad vague and I am not sure what to think of them. The power called Alter Ego allows my character to create a version of himself “at a weaker level,” yet what constitutes a “weaker level”? A few more words could have gone a long way to put the rules lawyers at ease here. If I am a hero at Level 10, do I build a mundane “secret identity” of myself at Level 5, or 3, or 1?? Let’s face it, when somebody is at Level 10, then Level 9 is “at a weaker level” to them, and any level lower than nine. Do I get a point pool to build my weaker self with? If so, how much? If I get a point-based system to begin with, a little bit of additional explanation could not have hurt there.

In general, the lengthy superpowers list makes the current version of TBS unnecessarily bulky. It used to be just 17 pages, but with the superheroic options it is now 44 pages, so more than the original core rules’ page count has been added, basically to bring it closer to superhero games and GUK, above all else. When I first downloaded the file of TBS, frankly I was not even expecting to get a full superhero system, and was not looking for one.

If the actual, relevant core mechanics and char-gen are explained on less than 10 pages in a PDF, but I also get 28 pages of comicbook powers, I get the impression that I am reading the first book of a comicbook superhero game, not a generic fast-play RPG system. The superpowers may be a turn-off to people who have previously played in fantasy or cyberpunk-influenced worlds, the fan base to whom the powers might be appealing is really rather small. Again, I am only talking from experience. In order to remedy that, I think that the 28 pages with the super-abilities should either be moved permanently to the GUK book or be given their own free PDF on the web. Then Parker could go right back to a tidied-up version of the original 17- or 18-page Basic System document. Add a footnote at the end declaring, “Superpower Rules and options available in a separate file,” and you are set, and ready to go.

All in all, I maintain that the new rules engine TBS is a very technical system, and does not actually slim down the number of stats and “boxes” on the character sheet – not if you have already been using a version of Fuzion or GURPS or maybe BESM before it. It is not a file that offers any new insights into the roleplaying arts and techniques, or a new concept to build player-characters. Rolling up stats, calculating derived stats, buying advantages and talents, adding Stats to Skills – all those are technical operations that have long been around in gaming. Task resolution follows the examples set by at least half a dozen known games in the market, it clearly does not venture from that path. The same thing can be said about TBS’ combat system. You need rolls for attack, defense, and then damage for every action in every turn. I was actually missing a sentence on initiative, I do not think there is a rule spelled out for it. The openness of TBS so far could allow either taking the higher value in Agility as a criterion to determine who goes first on a turn, or rolling Agility MSB+1D20 for that. Still, once you think about it, it looks more as if Parker forgot to include his rule for initiative in the published PDF version. There ought to be something on it. Personally, I also hate to think about using TBS as a patch for a part in another, bigger system that I may not like, or as a simplified version for something else where my players may well accept the respective “something else” or even like it better. Conversely, I am also not crazy about taking TBS as my new “base” and trying to stick in options for combat, magic, or experience points from other game systems. I think every single rules system should be judged on its own merits only, and that is what I have tried to judge TBS by. Why does it want to conform to a set of conventions practiced by the majority of games in the hobby? Why is that even a big deal? – I tell you what. Who cares whether D&D or Palladium or other systems do a certain rule in a specific way? Why should that even have a bearing on a new system you are working on? Why not go wild and strengthen your independence?

While I may not be able to get satisfactory answers to those questions right away, I can assure you this: All the core rules and the suggestions presented in TBS actually work, and if you correct two or three typos in the PDF, and make a few notes on character sheets and blank notebook paper, the rules should handle a typical adventure game rather well. The rules document is better organized for beginners than most of Fuzion and competing systems. It does not get bogged down by trying to emphasize any one of the established genres over others. The lay-out also facilitates the process of getting started. You may in fact have a clear-cut concept on your table for a game world and the first adventure before you even look up the rules, and when you need them, you will probably find all the



basic stuff in one and the same PDF (within the first 10 pages, no less!). You do not have to search around for very long to find out how much damage a .44 caliber pistol or a medium-size battleaxe does. Taking into account that those very things tend to get spread over three different chapters, or pushed into an appendix at the end of a book in other RPGs, I am happy that they are so clearly organized in TBS.

On the same subject, it has to be said that a single page with a table of contents would have added to my enjoyment. Why not insert it after the title-page in an updated version? I also believe that this system could be trimmed down to using only a 1D20 and a handful of D6s, since the other dice are used only for very specific rules mechanics, but never for actions in the flow of the game.

In the ratings system used by RPGnet, I am perfectly willing to give Parker's set of rules a "4" for Style and a "3" for Content.

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