

Social skills and role-playing

Some people don't feel tabletop RPGs should have skills like Persuasion, Deception and the social applications of Intuition.

Some objections to these skills are really objections to bad implementations of them. In at least one famous d20-based game, for example, it is possible to permanently brainwash someone into becoming fanatically devoted to you with one roll. Before deciding you don't like having these skills in your game, read the *Fantasy Infinity* versions carefully – you will find that they have far less potential for abuse than those in some other systems.

That won't address every objection, though. Some players feel that having the dice determine the results of things like negotiations steals from role-playing; if the player comes up with a great argument or clever offer, some people think it's unfair to deny the character the fruits of that based on a bad dice roll. Similarly, there are those who object to allowing a player who is very shy and inarticulate to persuade NPCs with his character's golden words without, at the very least, some indication of what those words actually were.

These would be much more persuasive arguments if those making them used the same standard for handling other skills. But no-one ever seriously suggests using this standard for swordsmanship or stealth. Try to even *imagine* someone straight-facedly suggesting such a standard for spellcasting! (Even ostensible practitioners of Hermetic magick don't think it works anything like magic in *Fantasy Infinity*, or most other RPGs.) Part of the appeal of RPGs is portraying characters with abilities the player doesn't have. If there's a good argument for making an exception of social skills, and only social skills, I haven't seen it.

Besides, the outcomes of social situations are much less predictable than people who make such arguments seem to recognize. Just because you think an argument is compelling doesn't mean it will persuade any random person you present it to. (To prove this to yourself, read the comments on any Internet message board, ideally on a subject you're knowledgeable about.) The unpredictability the dice introduce can be more realistic – not to mention less subject to bias – than just leaving everything to the GM's judgment.

For those unpersuaded by these arguments, there are many ways to handle social skills. The most radical would be dropping the offending skills entirely and handling those tasks entirely via role-playing. Using this style, Social becomes a relatively weak skill with Streetwise as its only specialty, and there's no point in capturing more than one Social specialty node, which breaks up the flow of the Skill Tree a bit. However, this probably won't damage the game much. (Perception would remain one of the best skills, even if you limit Intuition to things like detecting illusions.)

There are less drastic ways of handling this. One is just to reserve the right to resolve social situations via role-playing in cases where a player makes an exceptionally good (or bad) showing, while using the dice the rest of the time. Another, sometimes very fun, approach is to roll the dice, then have the player role-play the interaction, playing it to the best of their ability if the roll was good, or intentionally screwing it up in some way if the roll was bad. Yet another is to act out the situation and then roll, interpreting the dice result as how the characters' words are received, possibly adjusting the difficulty for especially strong role-playing.

Exchange	Difficulty
Heavily in the NPC's favour Or, paying the going rate for a good or service they normally offer	0
Somewhat in the NPC's favour	1
Pretty equal (but not a service the NPC offers routinely)	2
Somewhat in your favour	3
Heavily in your favour, or the NPC has good reason to suspect you won't hold up your end	4–6
NPC doesn't like you or you've inconvenienced them in the past	+1
NPC hates your guts, is hostile to a faction you're obviously allied with, or you've actively harmed them in the past	+2

You don't need to use this skill for most purchases and other routine business; no negotiation is required to just buy something at its normal price. This skill *could* be used for haggling, though this should be rare and reserved for major purchases – some merchants welcome haggling, but most have no interest in it and some even take it as an insult.

Social (Streetwise)

Use this skill to grasp the dynamics of new social situations, for example to learn what factions exist and their relative power. You also know, or can figure out, the best places to go to for goods or services, which can help you sell unusual loot (especially items someone might want back), hire mercenaries who won't stab you in the back, or find out who hired the guy who tried to assassinate you last week.

Ear to the Ground: You can figure out the social and political dynamics of anything from a rival group of adventurers to a foreign culture, provided you interact with it for a reasonable amount of time (an hour or so for an adventuring party, a week at minimum for an entire unfamiliar culture). The table below lists some sample tasks and their difficulties:

Task	Difficulty
Identify major factions everyone knows about	0
Identify less obvious factions, divisions within a faction, or who holds real power in one (may or may not be the nominal leadership)	1–2
Identify factions that actively try to hide their existence, discern someone's real loyalties when these are not obvious, discern the existence and nature of corruption within a faction (this does not give you hard evidence)	3–6
Unfamiliar city or area	+1
Vastly different culture from one's own	+2

Know People Who Know People (Trained): You can figure out where to find (or sell) goods, services, or information, even things that are unusual and/or illegal.