

WHISPERS FROM THE PIT

Do I Know That?

Salutations from the pit to all the Savages!

This issue of Whispers is another fan inspired piece, and discusses Common Knowledge and how much a hero knows about the world in which he lives. The forum post which prompted this read, *“CK is often ignored over skills. Example: Should a Noble have a knowledge of Noble etiquette, heraldry, and who’s who as a CK versus the commoner who took Knowledge (Nobility)? and other ideas/examples of use.”*

What is Common Knowledge?

Common Knowledge, to me, represents two different things.

First, it represents what a character knows about his profession, social position, culture, religion, and so on. The important word here is “his.” A Christian character might well be able to make a Common Knowledge roll for something basic, like knowing the names of the Apostles, but unless he’s a devout churchgoer (represented by the Knowledge (Religion) skill) he’s probably not going to be able to quote entire passages of the more obscure books of the Bible or sections from the Gospel of Saint Thomas. Likewise, unless he’s studied the Koran he probably doesn’t have much idea about the contents.

Using our reader’s example, a noble wouldn’t have to buy a skill in etiquette, heraldry, and who’s who for his own lands and those nearby. A soldier doesn’t have to buy Knowledge (Military Life or Rank Structure), a mariner doesn’t need Knowledge (Taverns) for ports he regularly visits, and a starship crewman doesn’t need Knowledge (Starship Recognition) for his own culture and those he regular deals with.

While our noble is okay with heraldry in his own lands (and logically those his people regularly interact with), he won’t have much knowledge of heraldic devices from a land 1000 miles away (or even half that). When dealing with heraldic symbols local to his native land, the noble makes a Common Knowledge roll. If he came across a knight whose heraldry was totally foreign, he would have to use the Knowledge (Heraldry) skill. No skill means no die roll—the crest is totally unknown, so you can’t sensibly have any hope of guessing who it belongs to. Even with a skill, the further away or more obscure the origins of the heraldry, the bigger the penalty the GM should apply. No character can know everything.

By the same token, our noble doesn’t need to buy a skill to interact with nobles of his own land. He’s been brought up that way and knowledge of etiquette is second nature to him. Again, if he met an outsider, he’d need a Knowledge

(Etiquette) skill to have a chance of knowing that noble’s specific customs and rules of behavior.

So what about our peasant, does he have any Common Knowledge regarding etiquette? Of course he does, it’s just not as detailed. Our peasant will know to address a noble with deference, when to bow, not to swear in front of the king, and such like, but he won’t know the intricacies of noble etiquette, which goblet you use for red wine and which for white, and that you address the Count of Whatsit as “Your Grace” because it’s one of the many titles of Prince Doodah of nearby Thingyland. If he took the Knowledge (Etiquette) skill, however, our peasant could, with a good roll, mingle with the highest nobles in the land without making a social gaff. He couldn’t pass himself off as a noble (his mannerisms and voice would need changing), but he wouldn’t make an ass of himself by using a fish knife for his meat course.

Second, it represents true common knowledge that every character in the setting has (unless he’s totally Clueless). A fantasy character probably knows elves live in forests, he might even know the names of their major gods, but he won’t have much clue about elf marriage customs, the details of their faith, and such like unless he took a skill or was an elf (in which case it would be covered as his race, as above). A character in a sci-fi game can probably name every major world within a few light years, but he won’t know specific details of cultures on that world unless his specific background gives him that opportunity.

In short, if a character could reasonably know something about a topic because of his background, let him use Common Knowledge. You can always give bonuses and penalties if you’re unsure how much he might know.

Sideline: Of course, in a modern game folk are often more aware of other cultures. We see them on the news or read about them in magazines or newspapers. What requires a skill in one setting might be Common Knowledge (albeit with modifiers) in another.

So What Is the Knowledge Skill?

In many cases (but not all), the knowledge skill can be seen as a more practical application of common knowledge.

So does a hacker need a Knowledge (Computer) skill or would he use Common Knowledge? Well, I’d say it’s a Knowledge skill, and here’s why. Any ability which is used for more than just knowledge should be a skill. A soldier needs Shooting to fire a gun, so a hacker should need to invest skill points to use his main skill as well. Any skill which serves a practical use should be paid for, one way or another,

with skill points.

Likewise, a librarian doesn't need Investigation to use a library. That's Common Knowledge for her, but knowing how to research archives quickly and accurately and then cross reference material is the Investigation skill. Common Knowledge should never replace an existing skill. The line is fine, but it does exist.

It is also a more in-depth study of a subject. As stated in the rules, dwarves might get a bonus to a Common Knowledge roll to tell a cavern is worked, but one with Knowledge (Stonecrafting) knows more specific details. A lawyer doesn't need Knowledge (Law) to do his daily job, but if he wants to be a great lawyer who can quote obscure rulings he does. An Egyptologist knows about Egypt, but a specific skill lets him know more about the nuances of the art of the XIV Dynasty when compared to the XVII Dynasty.

Okay, here are a few examples of when a specific Knowledge or other skill is required over Common Knowledge.

A doctor of medicine is usually either a general practitioner or a specialist. Very, very few doctors know everything about all aspects of medicine. A cardiologist doesn't need Knowledge (Medicine) to do his job, but he does if he wants to try brain surgery or podiatry. A GP will undoubtedly be able to diagnose common ailments, but he probably won't know much about rare diseases without a Knowledge (Medicine) skill.

A skilled hunter doesn't need to use Tracking or Knowledge (Tracks) to identify common animal prints. Heck, even I can tell a rabbit print from a cat's. He needs Tracking to follow them, however, as that's a practical application and an existing skill.

All characters can use Common Knowledge when answering common questions about their homeland. They'll know the major features, towns, nobles, and such like. Knowledge (Area Knowledge) let's them know minor trails through the forest, more people within the region, little bits of folklore known only to a single village, and so on.

Different Levels of Common Knowledge

Common Knowledge can cover different levels of knowledge. For instance, many people have heard of Tutankhamen. A Common Knowledge roll would be possible by most characters in say a pulp or modern game to know his name and the facts that he ruled over Egypt and he died young. However, it's very likely that only an Egyptologist can use Common Knowledge to know his throne name (the name his subjects would have called him). General historians might be allowed a roll, but there should be a penalty. (His throne name was Nebkheperure, by the way.) Characters with no

professional background in Egyptology could use Knowledge (History) with a penalty or Knowledge (Egyptology) with no penalty to know this, but not Common Knowledge.

Always remember as well that a character can look stuff up in books or on the internet. Any character can look up the name Nebkheperure in a library using Investigation. Knowledge and Common Knowledge are things the character can recall without resorting to using books.

Broad Strokes

Characters with a broad Common Knowledge background or Knowledge skill should be encouraged to think in smaller terms or face big penalties when it comes to facts that a broad, but not deep, knowledge wouldn't know.

As a broad stroke, a character with Knowledge (The World) would, naturally, know lots of stuff about the world. However, the skill is so broad that the GM should rightly impose a penalty to most rolls. Okay, the hero can tell you all the major countries, name all the oceans and seas and all the mountain ranges (not just the ones anyone with Common Knowledge can name), and such like, but he should get a penalty to knowing the third largest city in Bhutan or the location of the county town of Somerset, England. A character with Knowledge (England) wouldn't get that penalty because his knowledge is more focused.

A character whose job is a "historian," for example, should be made to pick a specific era of history or accept the fact that he has a general but not detailed understanding of history. Why? Because the history of our entire world (in terms of civilization) goes back over 10,000 years, encompassing literally thousands of cultures. No character should have common knowledge of that much history without suffering increasing penalties as the information grows more specific.

The wider the scope, the less detail a character should know. Why? Because if he didn't characters could just take Knowledge (Everything) and be done with it.

Alternate Uses for Other Skills

While we're discussing skills, let's take a look at how other skills can be used in different genres. At first glance, not every skill may seem appropriate for a setting. A sci-fi game with Tracking may seem strange (Captain Kirk never tracked anyone, if I recall correctly), as might a fantasy game using Piloting. In some cases, you may have to drop a skill from your setting, but it's also worth spending time reading between the lines of a skill and seeing if you can twist it slightly to fit.

Take Tracking, as a key example. It's been mentioned on the forums that Tracking could be used in sci-fi for a sensor use skill. Instead of following footprints, the hero is tracking energy emissions from the ship's engines. Naturally you'll

have to tweak the Tracking Table a bit, but that's easy to do. The weather modifiers can be replaced with space modifiers, like "Asteroid field -2" or "Cosmic storm -4". You might even invent new mods, like "Damaged Engines +2" to represent leaking reactor cores, which are easier to trace.

Another forum poster has said he uses Lockpicking and Investigation for computer hacking. Lockpicking represents the security side of the activity, whereas Investigation covers finding data that might be useful (like user names).

Whether you want to use Knowledge (Hacking) or Lockpicking and Investigation for hacking or Knowledge (Sensors) instead of Tracking in your settings is personal choice. At the end of the day, the hero is still spending skill points.

Repair in a fantasy game might be a substitute for craft, though you might want to limit what it can be used for according to a hero's background. A blacksmith might use Repair to make weapons or armor, but he should get a hefty penalty for using it to weave a tapestry or shape a clay pot.

Driving (as also suggested by a fan) could be used for just cars and trucks in a modern game, with Riding (which might not be used much for horses) representing bikes, jet skis, and such like. This begins to get close to the "Should I split Shooting into guns and bows?" line, but this is personal choice. *Savage Worlds* was designed to have one skill cover all driving (or all ranged weapons), but the rules aren't written in stone, and what works for your game is cool with us.

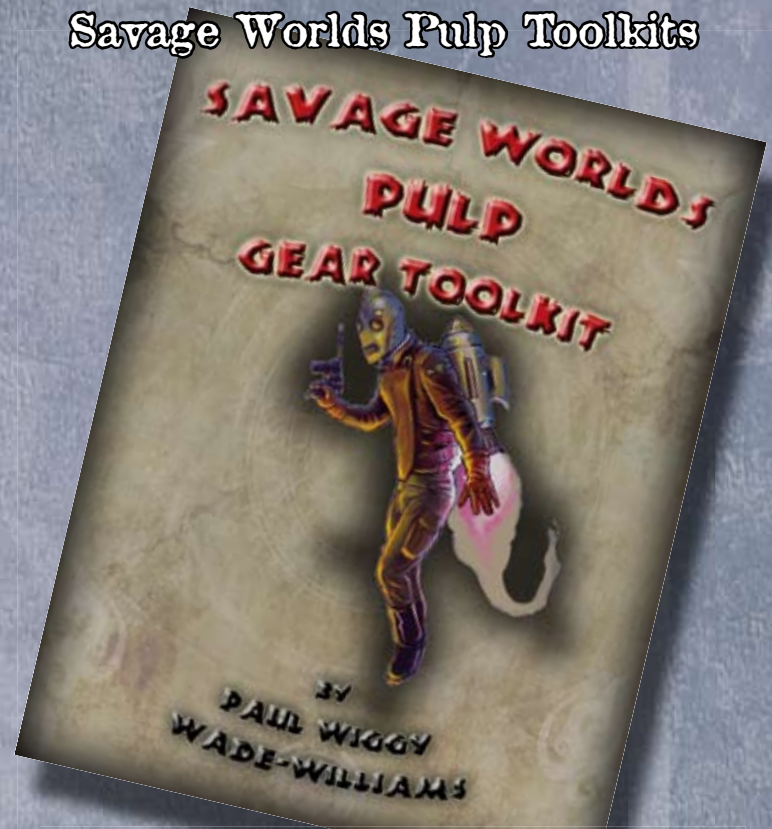
Investigation (written sources) isn't much use for a fantasy game based purely on an oral culture, but it could be used to piece together clues. Notice lets you find them, Investigation fills in the blanks. Of course, unless you're playing a detective game, you probably don't use this skill too much.

The key thing to remember when deciding whether to change a skill you might otherwise drop is whether or not it will be used a lot by the players. Taking Driving to control a war troll in your fantasy game might make sense, but not if it's just for the NPCs to use every once in a while. You might be better dropping it and giving NPCs a special ability.

So, there's some basic advice on Common Knowledge, Knowledge, and alternate skill use. My final piece of advice is, where possible, to encourage Common Knowledge use before you make a character buy lots of separate Knowledge skills. *Savage Worlds* heroes have limited skill points and players should feel their points were well spent by getting to make use of them frequently.

Wiggy

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