The Ultimate Skill

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The Review:

Reviewed By Gordon Feiner

The Upside:

The Ultimate Skill is a massive tome of a book that covers the Skills in the Hero System extensively. At four hundred pages it's one of the largest Fifth Edition books to date. But the biggest thing to keep in mind is that this book is mostly a reference tool. It's not designed to be used in it's entirety, instead it covers Skills across various genres so the Players and GM need only the parts relevant to their chosen genre and campaign. It's a very nice tool to have on hand for any game that wants to emphasize skill use.

The book is divided into four chapters. The rules for using Skills in the Hero System. The Skills themselves. Skills as related to Equipment (Automatons, Vehicles, AI, etc...). Skills in the Environment (combat, zero-gravity, and underwater). Pretty strait forward and logical organization.

Chapter 1 - Skill Rules. This takes the 6 or so pages of Rules for Skills from the Fifth Edition Rules and expands it to a full fifty-five pages. Going over ways to spindle, mutilate, adjust, tinker, expand, contract, ignore, simplify or complicate using Skills in the Hero System.

Appropriately enough the book opens with a section on Buying Skills. It involves a short discussion on changing the cost of Skills within the game and some possibly effects it might have. Then it introduces a new concept to how to structure skill purchases in Hero: Skill Combinations, a flat cost gets a character a few select skills that are closely related somehow (usually by a profession). The first section finishes off with a discussion on Skill Period, how to adjust skills for the genre period (modern, fantasy, future, etc...) the game is taking place in, each Skill in chapter 2 goes into this in more depth.

The next part of the chapter is Skill Rolls, starting with some novel ways one can alter how the Skill Roll is calculated to create a different feel in your game, and the ramifications that might have. It goes on to talk about the Success or Failure of a Skill Roll, Untrained skill use, Complimentary skill rolls, Skill vs Skill contests, Skill specializations, and adds a few bits not covered anywhere in the main rules book. These are Extraordinary skill rolls, Base times to use skills, and learning skills which includes a cool optional rule for forgetting unused skills over time.

The third part of the chapter covers skill modifiers, both generally and by skill category, though it does note that each Skill in chapter two comes with it's own list of specific modifiers. Part four covers Everyman Skills, how to create a list for your game and comes with a bunch of suggested lists for each of the major genres Hero typically covers (Cyberpunk, Dark Champions, four flavors of Fantasy,

Martial Arts, Post-Apocalyptic, Pulp, four flavors of Science Fiction, Superheroes, Western, And Victorian) and also has a note of Everycreature Skills (for mundane beasts) and Everymonster Skills (for fantastic beasts). Part five covers Skill Enhancers in detail and then goes on to ways to create new Enhancers, different kinds of enhancers and other ways to simulate a large number of background skills. The last part of chapter 1 covers Skills and how they might interact with the other Elements of a Hero Character, Perks, Talents, Powers and so on. It does include a part on Skills and Power Frameworks for GMs wanting to allow that combination.

Overall, chapter 1 does a good job of expanding on Skills information in the main book with expanded information, alternate rules for using Skills and simply going into a lot of detail on how to make Skills a more prominate part of your game.

Chapter 2 - The Skills. Chapter two opens up with a discussion on how to use each of the five main Skill Categories the Hero System uses, this is pretty general information listing each skill in the category and a few generalized notes. Of note is that Interaction Skills gets a good expanded discussion on how to use them, how long they last and how to resist the effects of them. Also included is short a section on using a different type of grouping, categories by skill function. Given as examples are Perceptive Skills and Technological Skills.

The second part of the chapter expands on the descriptions of the skills themselves. In Fifth Edition there are sixty-seven skills listed, they take up twenty-nine pages in the Fifth Edition Revised book. The Ultimate Skill expands this to two-hundred and eighty-five pages, Steve left no stone unturned. The descriptions are broken down into several easy to reference sections. Every skill gets at least two pages, most skills get many more than this.

Every skill has a general description of what it does. Then a section on Using the skill in a game, breaking down into as many sub-sections as is needed for the skill, including tables for modifiers for each skill. A section going into any equipment needed to perform the skill, or stating that none is needed if that's the case. Powers that may interact with, negate or affect how a skill is used. Base Times required to use the skill for given tasks and how to modify them if needed. Consequences Of Failure for each skill. Suggestions for Subdividing, or Collapsing a skill so it's more detailed or less detailed depending on how cinematic or realistic you want it to be in your game. The last part of each skill description is my favorite: Genre By Genre uses for skill, a discussion on how a skill can be used differently or how it works differently in different genres. An infinitely useful section for those GMs who want to get the skill use closest to the time period of the genre being played.

I was going to go into a Skill By Skill breakdown, but with sixty-seven of them this review would have quickly become Epic in nature. Perhaps given time I'll write a full article on how each and every skill is treated. For now I'll pull a few highlights. Language Familiarity has been massively expanded, the new Language Familiarity chart is six pages long covering just about any language spoken on Earth. The Science Skill details is extensive and divides things into Field; Discipline; SubDiscipline; Specialty for those that want added detail to their games Science related subjects. Security Systems comes with a number of write-ups for traps and security devices saving you a lot of work on designing such things.

The last section of Chapter Two is New Skills, which adds nine new skills to the system. A few of the new skills are reprints from other source books that introduced them. Armorsmithing is reprinted from Fantasy Hero, Hoist from The Ultimate Brick, and Parachuting from Dark Champions. The other six skills are completely new and fit very well within the system. Since they've never seen print before this book I'll actually cover them in brief.

Divination is a form a skill based Precognitive Clairsentience (the Power). It allows a character to try and predict the future. It has some pretty interesting information on various kinds of Divination (all

real, several dozen are covered). It's a good skill for games wanting this ability but not wanting to introduce Powers. Feint does exactly what it implies, allows a character to make a feint in combat before an actual attack. This skill has long been missing from Hero in my opinion and I'm glad to see it finally added as an optional skill for people to use. Instructor is a skill that allows one to teach skills to others. It gets very little actual coverage but it uses the rules for Learning Skills which are covered extensively in Chapter One and many individual skills have a bit on how one can learn this skill. Musical Instrument Familiarity is a very cool category based skill, it allows characters to play various kinds of instruments, very useful for Fantasy Hero bards. Poisoning is a skill that goes into creating and introducing various poisons. It also touches on the effects of Poisons, and possible problems (with solutions) to poisons in a game. Research is the last new skill, and is another excellent addition to the Hero Skill List, it allows a character to find information. This does not replace Cramming (though it has rules to work with it), but does compliment other skills, most appropriately Knowledge type skills.

Between the vastly expanded skill descriptions (ten times the information as the base rules) and the new skills this chapter makes this book a must have for any and every Hero Game out there.

Chapter 3 - Skills And Equipment. This chapter covers buying skills for various types of equipment. It briefly covers Automatons and Computers. It more extensively covers Vehicles, going over each type of skill separately. It also covers Bases, specifically Laboratories. Going over both how to buy them, level or quality of a laboratory and goes over what kind of lab each skill would provide.

The final part of the chapter is about a dozen write-ups for various kinds of equipment that skills might utilize for bonuses. Mostly this demonstrates ways to create Skill Based Equipment.

The chapter is short, but useful. I think the most useful part is the discussion on Labs and the descriptions of what kinds of labs each skill provides.

Chapter 4 - Adventuring With Skills. This chapter is only four pages long, but covers some helpful guidelines for using skills in adverse conditions. The first part is In Combat, where many skills aren't used. It does provide a Skill-Based alternative to the Multiple Power Attack introduced in Fifth Edition for those that don't want to use that optional rule. Most of the Combat Skills cover what they do and don't do extensively in their own descriptions and aren't repeated here. The other part is Environment, covering skills in different types of gravity (high, low and none) as well as Underwater, several skills get specific mention there as they act differently, or not at all, underwater.

While short, the chapter has several useful tips in it, and shouldn't be overlooked.

The book finishes out with a Bibliography, giving one resources to utilize should they want even more detail in some of their skills. And one of my favorite parts of Hero Books: a good solid Index to find things, especially important in a four hundred page book.

The Downside:

A few quibbles come out, it's hard to include everything in a book but there are a few bits I would really liked to have seen.

It would have been nice to see a discussion on creating your own Skill Categories in Chapter Two, Hero is all about customization and even a paragraph of ideas would have been cool to see.

In Chapter Three under Laboratories I think a description for the nine new skills on what labs created with them would be and act like would have done more to integrate these ideas into the system more.

The Otherside:

Is the book useful to non-hero gamers? Definitely. If you need more information on Sciences, Forensic Medicine or any number of skills that have universal application to them this book is a massive wealth of information. Every gamer should have a copy on their shelves.

Final thoughts? Worth every penny you pay for it. And the binding is good and sturdy for a big book like this one. More information on skills than you will find anywhere else currently. As I said above - this should be on every gamers shelf who is interested in adding skills to their game.

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