

HOUSERULE FOOTNOTES

# STOCKING STUFFERS



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**PATHFINDER**  
ROLEPLAYING GAME COMPATIBLE



# HOUSERULE FOOTNOTES: SKILLS

## STOCKING STUFFERS

Houserules are funny things. They often come from a desire to make a game “better,” but one group’s houserules are often seen as terrible fun-killers by other groups. In many cases that’s because different groups want different things to matter in their games, and focus on different elements. This is often a matter of play style – some groups never worry about encumbrance at all, others only look it up if the Halfling rogue tries to carry the orc barbarian to safety, and a few have players recalculate their move rate every time they use a crossbow bolt. As long as everyone is having fun, none of those are “wrong,” but it’s easy to see how houserules designed for one of those groups might be hated by the others.

Which brings us to *Stocking Stuffers*. The following is a collection of house rules I’ve created or encountered in other groups over the years. Some are in use in my own campaigns, others aren’t. Each is presented as a separate idea, and GMs are encouraged to look them over with a critical eye. If any seem to be a good match for the GM’s home campaign, a quick conversation with the players may be in order. If not, perhaps reading these will spark an idea for a better house rule. At the very least, we hope you enjoy reading these little twists to the normal rules, which we offer free of charge as our holiday gift to our fans, patrons, and fellow gamers.

Owen K.C. Stephens  
Winter, 2012

Though skills get one of the shortest chapters in the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Core Rulebook*, the impact of skills can be felt in every aspect of character building and adventure design. But skills also define who a character is, beyond what the character can do in a typical encounter.

## BACKGROUND SKILL POINTS

*Lord Goderic Penrose tried not to twitch as his squires strapped on his plate armor. He wanted to get moving, to leap upon Akkason, his steed, and charge into battle. The advancing Tarsian army expected him to avoid any engagement, and retreat back to the more defensible Hilllands. But Lord Goderic had read the histories of the Tarsian Khans, and knew what they did to retreating armies. He would face them here, on open ground, where his cavalry could be used to best effect. But that meant his heavy armor, and that meant waiting until his squires were done. Goderic turned to Oppoc, his page, and saw the boy had a thick letter with golden script on the front. As much to distract himself from the delay of suiting up as anything, he cleared his throat and nodded meaningfully at the boy’s hands when Oppoc looked up.*

*“Ah, this just came from the Ablegate of Priun, my Lord.”*

*“Well?” Goderic tried to keep his voice even, but he wiggled his half-gauntleted fingers to indicate how impossible it was for him to open the letter himself. Oppoc flushed slightly, and gently opened the letter. His eyes flashed back and forth as he scanned the missive for its key details. When he looked back up, there was a hint of tears in his eyes.*

*“His holiness thanks you for your work in translating the Letters to the Orc Shamans you and your allies recovered from the Kingdom of Graves, and commends you for your monograph comparing the teachings therein to the Blue Book of Virtues. For these and other acts of scholarship, you are to be named Illuminatus, Teacher of the Faith.”*

*A slow smile spread over Goderic’s face. Now, if he could just live long enough to enjoy the unexpected honor...*

For many people, a fighter having only 2 skill points per level is, at best, annoying. In most cases, players with this objection are not complaining that they can’t keep maximum ranks in more than two combat skills (such as Acrobatics and Intimidate), but that they want their fighter to be a blacksmith who is also a faithful scholar of his faith. Since few games have been unbalanced by allowing characters to have maximum ranks of craft (blacksmithing) and Knowledge (religion), and if your

players are happier when they can buy such skills, why not give characters a few extra skill points?

The Background Skill Points rule gives every character 2 additional skill points at each character level regardless of the character’s class. These skill points may only be used for Craft, Knowledge, Perform, and Profession skills. While this does make characters more flexible (especially bards), and produces a slight increase in the overall power level of the PCs, the increase is modest enough to not require any adjustment to encounters they face.

# EQUIPMENT

Some characters are defined as much by the things they carry as their class and race, so it makes sense that some groups’ house rules focus on equipment.

## ALTERNATE SPECIAL MATERIALS

*Mythrathene ran her ringer along the supple material, while the shop’s keeper stood nervously by. It was the softest leather she had ever felt, though she made sure her expression did not change. Dyed a green so dark it was almost black, the material was half the thickness of the hide making up her armor, but as she twisted it with her considerable strength it showed no sign of stretching out of shape or tearing.*

*She glanced at the shopkeeper. “Hyrda-hide, you say?” He nodded enthusiastically. “And it’s how much?”*

*The shopkeeper’s face fell. “A suit such as your own would cost slightly more than one-thousand gold. I would love to charge less, of course. But the costs to gather such material are high, as are the alchemical materials needed to cure it, dye it, keep it supple...”*

*Mythrathene raised one hand, and the shopkeeper immediately shut up. The cost was high, but not out of her reach. And such armor would allow her to move more quickly, more silently...*

*She turned to the nervous man, and smiled. “I’ll take three suits.”*

The *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Core Rulebook* offers four special materials – adamantine, cold iron, darkwood, and mithral. Each offers prices allowing it to add special modifiers to a range of metal or wooden materials made from it. But nothing is offered to allow special leather or cloth goods. For some reason while the rules support fantastic and advanced swords and chainmail, a bard dressed in studded leather and carrying a whip is out of luck.

The alternate special materials rule simply allows cloth and leather items to be made using the same modifiers (to cost, weight, and other statistics) as metal or wooden items made with adamantine, darkwood, or mithral. (Cold iron’s primary property is its ability to bypass the DR of some foes, and thus it’s appropriate to continue to restrict it to metal objects). Obviously, the cloth and leather is not considered to actually be made of adamantine or mithral, just from materials with the same costs and modifiers. The effect of this charge is fairly minor, and the largest impact is requiring the GM to define the equivalent materials for cloth and leather versions of adamantine, darkwood, and mithral. While these may vary by campaign, a few suggestions are given below.

## OBJECT CRITICALS

*The kobold laughed as the jar of flaming poo shattered against Than Yo’s bare chest, burning him and covering him with its stench at the same time. Gibbeld the Crossbowman fired a shot at the vile lizard, but it just laughed and ducked past an archway, slamming a thick door behind it. Another bolt slammed into the wood, but had no effect on the door itself.*

*While Than Yo wiped the burning filth from his bronzed skin, Burgermeister Jon Regus rushed the shut door and began hacking at it with his sword. The blade cut into the wood again and again, but it was clear the effort would take far too long. Than Yo stepped up, hefting his huge axe.*

*“Aside, Jon. There is work for Woundgriever, the Eighth Blow!”*

*Than Yo swung the enormous weapon in a massive arc, striking the door with a thunderous impact. Wood shattered. One of the door’s planks cracked. Gibbeld and Burgermeister Jon lined up behind Than Yo, and grinned as the second blow smashed the door apart.*

Under the normal rules, inanimate objects aren’t subject to critical hits. This makes a certain amount of sense – inanimate objects lack internal organs, don’t suffer from shock, and don’t bleed. On the other hand, anyone

Special Material	Cloth Equivalent	Leather Equivalent
Adamatine	Phase Spider Silk	Demonskin or Angelskin
Darkwood	Shadowcloth	Pegasus Leather
Mithral	Feyhair Weave	Hydra Hide

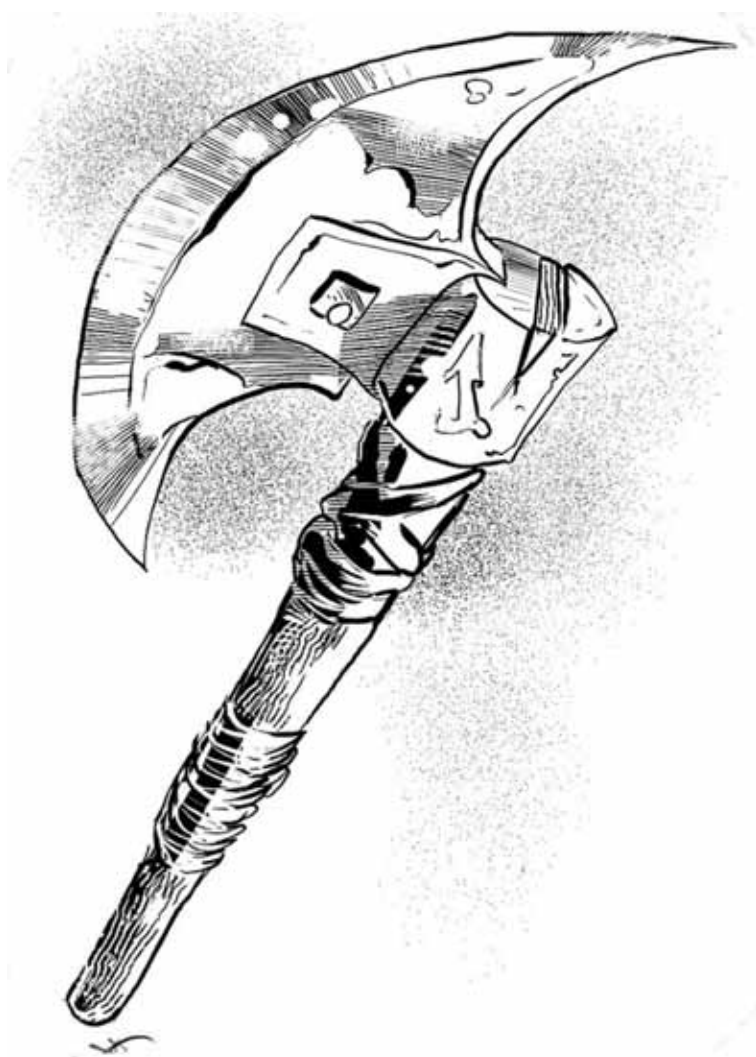


who has ever cut piles of firewood with an axe knows that sometimes, the blade hits *just* right, and the log splits with one swing. And after all, some weapons are evolved from tools *designed* to more easily damage certain types of materials, so why not let them score critical hits against those materials?

Object criticals assume that certain types of weapons (as defined by weapon groups in the fighter class's weapon training feature) can score critical hits against inanimate objects made of specific materials. You can even perform a coup de grace as a full round action against an immobile, unattended inanimate object of the right material to score a guaranteed critical hit (as lumberjacks and miners often do when chopping wood or breaking up large rocks). Inanimate objects still do not need to make a Fortitude save when hit by a coup de grace, regardless of the weapon used.

**Axes:** Axes can score critical hits against objects made of wood or mostly made of wood, including most wooden doors, shields, and hafted weapons.

**Hammers:** Axes can score critical hits against objects made of earth, rock, or stone, including most stone walls and earth elementals.



**Blades:** Light and heavy blades can score critical hits against objects made of cloth or fiber, including most normal clothing, ropes, and carpets.

## OTHER RULES

House rules don't always fit into neat categories. Below is one additional rule we couldn't find a good home for.

### SPOTLIGHT TIME

*Alesa tightened her grip on her dagger, and checked her empathic link to Stalker one more time. The cat was nearly invisible in the shadows, watching the far end of the gate and its guards. If reinforcements headed toward her targets, Alesa would know from the sudden spike of worry and fear in her familiar.*

*The gate guards were looking at her as she strode toward them, dagger hidden in the folds of her skirt. Alesa had been hauled out of their precious town in manacles. She'd barely escaped her captors, nearly died fleeing in secret on a caravan, and had to be rescued by her new traveling companions or she'd have starved in the wilderness. But now they needed her, and she had no intention of allowing misfortune, bad timing, or fear hold her back. This was her chance to prove she could pull her own weight.*

*As the first guard cleared his throat to challenge her, she hurled the slumber hex directly at him. The second guard was surprised to see his comrade slump to the ground, and before he could react she leapt upon him, swinging her dagger for his throat!*

In many forms of fiction, especial serial fiction such as television shows, comics, and book series, its fairly common for the focus of the narrative to spotlight specific characters. With fiction that focuses on a single protagonist, such spotlights often bring background characters to light, while with ensemble casts, it often changes from a general plotline that works with all the main characters equally to one that highlights the background and actions of just one character. In all these cases, the idea is to spotlight a single character so the audience has a chance to know and care about that character.

Spotlight time works differently in an RPG, because the audience controls the main characters, in the form of players and their PCs. One reason the traditional set up of fighter, cleric, magic-user, and thief has persisted so long is that it divided the roles of the main characters into different areas. As a result, when the role of a specific PC is crucial to the

success of the group, the player of that character has the whole group's attention, and gets the most time to discuss the PC's actions and options.

Spotlight Time is designed to emulate this focus by giving one player at a time a bonus to all his actions. When a game session begins, the GM randomly determines who gets the first spotlight time, and in what order the spotlight will shift from player to player. The exact length of spotlight time should be short enough to ensure everyone gets the spotlight once during the game session, but long enough to be useful. In a group with four players who normally have a seven-hour game session, each spotlight time should last about 75 minutes. After each player has had the spotlight once, the spotlight ends until the next game session. For groups with very long game sessions, it may be worth having the spotlight time be short enough that everyone gets it twice. In stable groups with regular sessions, the spotlight can continue to shift from player-to-player until the session ends, then pick up again at the beginning of the next game session.

When a player has the spotlight, he gains a number of spotlight points equal to one per 15 minutes of the planned spotlight time. These spotlight points can be used to reroll any one d20 roll the player makes after seeing the result (and treating results of 1-10 on the reroll as results of 11-20), gain access to one feat the player's character meets the prerequisites for (which lasts for the rest of the spotlight time), or force one NPC, making a d20 roll regarding the player's character, to reroll the d20 after the result of the initial roll is revealed.

Of course players being the system-twisting rules masters they are, groups using spotlight time are likely to "game the system," and try to make sure they take on challenges that can best be solved by a specific PC when that character's player has the spotlight. Indeed, they may change their plans based on who has the spotlight, deciding to pick a fight with the guards if the fighter has a spotlight, but try to negotiate with the brigands demanding a bridge toll when the bard has the spotlight.

Let them.

Having players decide, as a group, to focus on what one character does best while that character's player has the spotlight isn't an exploit of these rules. It's the whole point. This behavior encourages the players to modify their plans to work with each PC, and thus each player, in turn. A group of players that

normally attacks first and asks questions never may find themselves thinking of ways for the sorcerer to use either diplomacy or *charm person* to get through an encounter for the first time ever. The player running the cleric, who never gets to do anything but cast *cure light wounds*, is suddenly rewarded for using offensive spells when he has a bonus no one else can use. And the silent rogue whose player rarely speaks at all has a chance to scout ahead, assassinate a guard, and bypass a trap because the group wants to get the most out of his spotlight time.

Spotlight time isn't a panacea for groups with problems spreading the attention around, but it does give the players with their minds firmly on synergies and system mastery a game mechanical reason to change up who takes the lead in different encounters. Nor does spotlight time have to be an all-or-nothing proposition for a game. A GM may decide to use spotlight time only for some game sessions (especially those that may include encounters where the PCs could use some help anyway), or just invoke it long enough in a session for each player to get the spotlight once.

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