

SKILL SPECIALISATION

By Bill Gant, February 2000

Some skills can be divided into sub-skills, or specialties. For example, a weaponcrafter could specialise in making armour, or a jeweller could specialise in gemcutting or goldsmithing. In each of the three publications of HârnMaster, there are different rules for handling the specialisation of skills.

Below is a short summary of each rule, with a brief evaluation:

❑ HÂRNMASTER 1st EDITION (HM1)

A character is permitted to select a specialty when his or her Skill Index (SI) reaches 6 (i.e. ML60) and each time the SI increases thereafter. Whenever the character uses his or her specialty, ML is considered to be 10 points higher. In addition, the Skill Base (SB) for the specialty is also considered 1 point higher than the SB for the general skill.

The same specialty can be selected more than once (i.e. double specialisation, triple specialisation, etc), but each additional selection is only worth a bonus of ML +5.

For weaponcrafters, the specialisation rules are applied somewhat differently: the first specialty should be either armour or weapons. Hence, an armour specialist would have a bonus of ML +10 when making any armour. Subsequent specialties *must* be within the first specialty, such as mail or kurbul if the first specialty was armour, or sword or axe if the first specialty was weapons. Thus, a weaponcrafter who specialises in producing mail armour gains a bonus of ML +15 when manufacturing mail, +10 when crafting any other type of armour (e.g. plate, scale), but no bonus when making weapons.

Because each weapon has a separate SB, weapon skills cannot be specialised. Instead, an opened weapon skill (e.g. broadsword) in a weapon group (Sword) yields full ML, while the remaining unopened weapon skills in that group (e.g. shortsword, falchion) can still be used, but at an EML -10 penalty.

Pros: A specialty can only be taken once the character reaches a certain level of proficiency; prior to attaining that level, he/she performs all sub-skills equally well/badly. It can be argued that this is quite realistic - before one can specialise, one must first learn the basics.

The bonus to Skill Base for specialties is a good idea.

A character may specialise multiple times in a single specialty. This appeals to ascetic characters who devote their lives to honing a particular skill to perfection.

Cons: There is one set of rules for handling weaponcrafting specialties, another for weapons and another for other skills. There's no consistency!

There are no specialties suggested anywhere for general skills. This can lead to arguments over what constitutes a specialty.

When a character reaches a particular skill level and chooses a specialty, he/she suddenly gains a bonus to that specialty. How can one reasonably explain a character with an ML of 59 in Physician one day, then on the next day he/she miraculously knows how to perform a specialty in Physician (say, Clean & Dress) at ML70? This seems unrealistic.

❑ HÂRNMASTER 2nd EDITION CORE RULES (HMC)

When a skill is opened, a specialty is immediately selected. The specialty name (instead of the skill name) is recorded on the character profile. Whenever the character uses the specialty, the ML of the skill is considered to be 10 points higher.

As the character becomes more proficient with a skill, he or she can add extra specialties. Upon reaching SI7 (ML70) and at each subsequent increase in SI (SI8, SI9, etc), another specialty may be added.

Characters may *not* select the same specialty more than once.

Pros: The specialisation rule applies to all skills that have sub-skills - consistency at last!

Specialties are suggested for each skill. Some skills disallow specialties altogether. Players and GMs no longer have to argue over what qualifies as a specialty... well, most of the time...

Cons: Character sheets can become very cluttered very quickly. Because a specialty provides a bonus to ML, players must record the actual skill and also all the specialties chosen for that skill (depending upon their characters' skill levels). A specialty should be chosen for nearly all open skills, so you can imagine how easy it would be to fill up the character profile of a PC with a lot of occupation skills - it gets worse if those skills are at SI7+.

By granting a bonus to a specialty, characters become less likely to fail skill rolls, which can be annoying to GMs. This is especially true for combat skills: a HMC character could pick up a Maul for the very first time with a Skill Base of 10 and wield it without any training at an AML of 70 (including the specialty and WAC bonuses)! Of course, the same would apply to NPCs...

❑ HÂRNMASTER VERSION 2.0 GOLD RULES (HMG)

When a skill is opened, a specialty is immediately selected. The specialty name is recorded on the character profile. The character only receives full ML when using a chosen specialty. If using another specialty within the same general skill, he or she suffers an EML -10 penalty.

As the character becomes more proficient with a skill, he or she can add extra specialties and enjoy full ML with them. Upon reaching SI6 (ML60) and at each subsequent increase in SI (SI7, SI8, etc) the character adds one specialty.

The character may select the same specialty a second time (i.e. double specialisation). This will result in a +5 bonus being applied when the double specialty is used.

Pros: Since a specialty no longer provides a bonus but instead prevents a penalty, the overall skill level is lower. The chance of failing a skill that has just been opened is lower than in HMC. Hence, there is more incentive to improve skills.

Cons: Players will probably grumble at not receiving a bonus to ML for using a specialty. However, the same applies to NPCs, so there is balance.

Which is the better method? HM1 has a fundamental problem of not being consistent. HMC makes skills too high, especially in combat. HMG may not appeal to players because skills are lowered. There is really no right or wrong answer, since it becomes a matter of personal choice.