

Talespinner said it all pretty well, but I have a couple of my own thoughts

1a) What skills can a player be good at in TTRPGs?

All the aspects that Talespinner mentioned---Resource Management, Prediction/chance/risk calculation, Position, Teamwork ,Understanding and application of mechanics---but I want you to take special note of the last point, effectively system mastery. I think that, of the 5 presented, this point is simultaneously the most widely applicable and the least explored because it contains all of the other 4 points and numerous other unique mechanics you can't just state without explaining.

It's especially important because, if you want players to be skilled at something in your game, it reminds you that you can't just take those other 4 elements and expect there to actually be skill in it. You have to develop specific mechanics for your players to be skilled in. In *Fueled by Blood!*, for instance, I have Reads, which test player awareness and understanding of fundamental rules by asking them make educated guesses about hostile attacks targeting them.

1b) How do systems test these skills?

I think by doing so directly: testing the players.

The system has a correct answer in mind (or a number of correct answers), and then gives the players clues for them to make decisions off of. You give clear positive feedback when the player does something good (increased damage for combos if that's what you want) and negative feedback when they do something bad (increased damage taken when they position poorly).

You're giving them a lesson on what the game wants out of them when they build their characters and read the rules (you deal bonus damage to isolated enemies, and take more damage if you fail to properly understand your enemies). Then you're testing them during play (how do you deal your damage? What do you need to know about enemies?). A skilled player either paid attention to the lesson, or learned quickly when they started to get answers wrong, and begins to understand your game at a fundamental level.

I think TTRPGs handle these kinds of skills the best. You could feasibly introduce some sort of dexterity based mechanics (like Dread does with Jenga) or deck/hand management, which builds off of these ideas, but I think they're a little more complex to work around.

2a) What are some systems that do this well?

I think my game does, of course. It didn't always, though, and it's taken a fair bit of playtesting to get here. What I learned during testing will inform what I write below.

2b) What do they do well?

Before I delve into it, here are the most recently playtested rules so you can check it out:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/19uF115p00L83JHWcLvM9vyzI-L3VTg?usp=drive_link

- *Resource Management and Risk Calculation:* The game is diceless and features a very interrupt heavy system. Your defense and offense are totally in your hands, and can be extraordinarily effective, so long as you know how to spend everything.
 - PCs have 5 resources (health, heat, actions, focus, and tempo), with everything but health being able to be spent on specific kinds of actions. Tempo and actions reset each turn, heat is gained/lost when the player takes specific actions, and Focus is like a pool of held actions. Knowing how and when to spend your resource can allow you to either completely blitz a tough hostile, or entirely avoid an otherwise lethal string of hostile attacks.
 - A key point here is that only 2 resources have per turn recharges. Everything else is spent more rarely, and so isn't tracked constantly: the players only check them when they want to do something specific. That saves some mental space and effort during play. Also, trackers directly on the character sheet for each of these resources is vital.
- *Position:* Here, I use zone maps of standard sizes (6, 9, and 12 zones) with very powerful zone tags and short ranges on attacks (1 adjacent zone is the usual max range) to make positioning and movement important.
 - Due to their ability to act of turn, a lot of the game revolves around more fragile PCs conserving resource to move out of the way of an attack as it happens, and positioning becomes an important in that it helps you conserve those very limited emergency buttons that you might want to use offensively instead. Zone tags also heavily impact the players' strategies by increasing the damage taken, decreasing healing done, or making their general defenses weaker, while also putting them closer to their enemies, forcing them to find a way to drag their target out from where ever they've holed up.
 - Early on, the game actually had much larger ranges, and I tried out larger zone maps, but these both had pretty severe issues. The goal is to create character action style combat, but longer ranges resulted in characters posting up at their max range and then never moving closer than that, while larger maps often resulted in combat splitting into multiple skirmishes that didn't engage with each other until 1 was finished.
- *Teamwork:* A single, key action heavily supports this point: Tag In, choose an ally, they immediately take a normal action.
 - This action, along with a number of abilities designed to help or easily combo off of allies, allows PCs to improvise team combos, or to pull each other out of sticky situations by sacrificing their own resources to get an ally out of harm's way, meaning that the better you are at managing yourself, the more you'll be able to help everyone else out.
 - I've found that these result, typically, in a very low amount of planning. Instead, players will just ask each other "do you want x buff?" when they begin to act. It does cause minor, frequent hiccups that I'm trying to

smooth out due to them interrupting each other, but it's not nearly as slow as actually planning everything out.

- System Mastery: There's all of the above, but also Reads, as previously mentioned, and the fact that combat isn't to the death for both sides. Instead, PCs have specific objectives and a strict, round-based timer that forces them to think on their feet and act with efficiency, as well as a score based on their combat performance.
 - Each hostile action has a specific trigger, or a statement which must be met in order for the hostile to be able to take their action. Triggers are grouped into 4 types (Automatic, Self, Target, Ally). An example trigger would be "(Ally) A Far Ally takes damage." Reads ask the Striker to pay attention to what's going on, and guess the action's trigger type based on what they see.
 - This set of rules has been by far the trickiest to get right, and still needs cleaning up. The trick here is that the information must be a) intuitive, b) clearly communicated to the player via the game itself, and c) completely consistent, all while also being d) opaque enough that the guesses don't feel completely obvious.
 - Every combat has a 2-3 round timer and specific objective. Typically, the objective is to kill a specific kind of hostile. When completed, combat immediately ends.
 - These are all important aspects to keeping up the game's pace. No timer, and the players can be very conservative with their resources and actions. They can turtle up and avoid all damage by playing in a cowardly fashion. No objective, and combat becomes a slog as they have to kill every last weak little enemy, even after all of the challenge is gone.

2c) What lessons, if any, can we learn from systems that (seem to) attempt this but do so poorly?

Chiefly, I think, the effects of not having enough possible answers to the questions that a game is asking. 5e gets ragged on for this issue in combat especially, given the martial/caster divide. After a certain point, casters have all of the answers the game is expect. Magical damage of multiple types, consistent CC, the ability to negate or maneuver around enemy actions, and extreme defense. Martials are given very little of these answers to the questions in 5e's combat. We can see how that creates discontent and places strain on the players to create answers for themselves to fill these gaps with.

Basically, that players not given tools to actually engage with and succeed in your game are going to regard it with discontent.

3a) Some of this clearly comes down to GMs being good at game design, but still - which systems make this easier for GMs (and how do they do so) ?

That's tough. 4e has been said, but I think Lumen 2.0 games are also heading in that direction by heavily using more narrative tags in place of super rigid mechanics. An enemy might have the [Pure Steel Armor] tag which can only be destroy with a [Crushing] weapon or object. That

lets the GM set up situations where a PC shines or, if they know none of the PCs have a specific tag, can force them to get creative and engage with the environment. It's a simple system that makes it easier to consider everything important to a battle---the PCs, the NPCs, and the environment.

3b) What are some things GMs should keep in mind that are more system-agnostic?

Enemy strengths and weakness. Even in a narrative system, you can have big armored guys standing in front of frail sharpshooters. How the hostiles in your encounter link together is extremely important. If enemies are too easy to deal with (which often comes about when you aren't considering how they function together) combat becomes boring, even if it is otherwise a statistical challenge.

A good fight has hostiles that can either combo off of each other (such as by setting down tags/conditions that another triggers off of), or that cover each other's weaknesses (like the fighter/sharpshooter example above).