Numenera for D20 Players - Article 1 (Stats and Stat Pools)

Introduction

This essay is part of a series to help you understand Numenera, if you are primarily a D&D player.

The first thing any Numenera player will tell you is that Numenera isn't the d20 System, and shouldn't be compared. They are right. But in practice, most gamers started on D&D, and it often represents the majority of their gaming background. I personally started in '78, and while I've tried many other games, D&D has always been my mainstay, and the concepts of any system I play are going to get looked at through the eyes of d20 mechanics, until I get the hang of it.

And that approach works, except when it doesn't. This essay will try to help you understand the translation, while also pointing out where it can get you into trouble.

This first article is about your character's most basic concept: Stats

Stats compared to "Attributes"

In D&D, before you have anything else, you have your attributes: Strength, Dex, Con, etc., and these define at a foundational level what you are capable of. If your character has a Strength of 20, you know he's going to be able to hit hard, knock down doors, lift large objects, etc. He's certainly going to be better at doing those things than a mage with a Strength of 4.

In Numenera, you don't really have stats---or you do, but they don't have values associated with them. Instead, you have a **stat pool** and a **stat edge** associated with each stat—but the stat itself doesn't do anything but align to a character's abilities, skills and tests. *This is a subtle and deceptively big difference.*

Those three stats are: Might, Speed and Intellect.

Might compared to "Str and Con"

For the first of these, Might, the natural assumption would be that Might = Strength, maybe with some Con thrown in. And by extension, if you have a higher Might Pool, you are stronger and more capable of performing feats of strength. There are several ways in which this is wrong:

- Stat pools are more endurance, than ability.

- Stat pools are more health, than ability.

- Stat pools will not make it inherently easier to perform a task.

Stat pools are more endurance, than ability

Some of your character's abilities require you to spend points from a given stat pool. So if you have a Might pool of 12, and it costs 2 to use an ability, you will be able to use the ability 6 time before your Might pool is depleted. Someone with a lower Might pool of 8, they could only use that ability 4 times before depleting the pool.

You also have the ability to apply "Effort" to make an action easier. This costs 3 points from your stat pool. You could apply Effort 4 times, before you depleted a 12 point Might pool.

Stat pools are more health, than ability

When you take damage from an attack, those points are removed from your appropriate stat pool. If you are fighting an abhuman who physically hits you for 3 points of damage, you lose 3 points from your Might pool. You could be hit 4 times before the Might pool of 12 was depleted. (see "Hit Points", below)

These concepts all stack, so your pools can go down pretty quickly: For example, you would spend 8 points in one turn if you used your 2 point ability, applied Effort *and* got hit all in one round.

Implications: if you had some means to spend 3 Might points to avoid an enemy's blow, and the enemy was doing 3 points of Might damage per blow...there would be no value in using that ability, because the Might pool would be reduced by 3 either way.

Stat pools will not make it inherently easier to perform a task

Target numbers are set by the difficulty of what you are trying. If you are trying to break down a Level 3 door, your target number is 9. It doesn't matter what your stat pool is, the target number is still 9.

You can apply a level of Effort, to reduce that to a target of 6...but so can another character whose Might pool is only 4. A higher might pool will let you use abilities or effort more often before your Might pool runs out, but you aren't more "mighty" in any given actions.

So when you hit a foe, a higher Might pool doesn't allow you to do more damage. In d20, a 20-Strength character with his trusty longsword would do d8+5. In Numenera, he will do 4 points (fixed) for that same attack. (Though you could apply Effort to increase damage.)

Stat Edges

As mentioned above, you also have a Stat Edge number associated with each stat. Your Edge lets you reduce the cost of doing something by the value of your Edge level. This is *closer* to being a base stat, but it's still not a perfect comparison.

If you have a 2 point Might ability, and if you had a Might Edge of 2, you could use that ability all day, without depleting your Might Pool at all. Or, you could apply it against your use of Effort, reducing the cost from 3 points to 1 (but not both in a single action.) But again, Stat Edge just stretches out how long your pool lasts. It doesn't make a given action any better on its own.

Speed compared to "Dex and Movement Speed"

In d20 terms, your Speed stat maps to dexterity and movement speed...but again, it's your endurance related to those things, not your capability level itself. So no matter what your Speed Pool or Speed Edge, you will not win a foot race, or juggle 5 balls better than a low-Speed Pool character, unless you spend Effort or have skills, abilities, etc. to help make it easier.

Your speed pool lets you use more abilities with a Speed cost, and it is also your ability to take Speed damage. If you end up fighting something like a Medusa, which damaged your Speed Pool, , then the size of your Speed Pool would represent your ability to stand up to her attacks for longer.

Intellect compared to "Int, Wis and Cha"

The third stat, Intellect, maps roughly to a combination of Intelligence, Wisdom and Charisma...but again, a higher Intellect doesn't mean smarter. It just means more intellectual stamina. Similarly, if somebody hits you with an Intellect attack, it goes against Intellect pool.

Extended Example: Your character has an Intellect Pool of 11. He is trying to break an ancient code of Difficulty 5. You are no cryptologist, so your target number is 15...you have only a 25% chance of succeeding. You decide to buckle down (apply Effort for 3 points.) This reduces your stat pool to 8, and reduces the Difficulty to a 4. You roll a 15...success.

Then the GM reveals a second Difficulty 5 code. You apply Effort again, reducing your Intellect Pool from 8 to 5, then roll a 12--another success.

You reach in to get the trinket you were after, and get hit in the face with a stun gas, which does 3 points of Intellect damage, reducing your pool from 5 to 2.

As you walk out of the ruins with the trinket, the person who hired you tries to shortchange you, and it's a difficulty 4 to convince him to honor his original bargain. Your Intellect is tired from all that code breaking you did earlier (not to mention the gas), so you can't muster the Intellect from your pool to apply Effort to the roll, and must just roll and hope to get a 12 or higher.

Stat Pools compared to "Hit Points"

In a d20 system, you have hit points. As mentioned above, in Numenera, your stat pools are like your hit points. These concepts align very well, except that in d20 you have one big pool of points, and in Numenera you have three smaller ones. Also, in d20, losing hit points doesn't actually affect you until you die. In Numenera, losing pool points means you lose potential, as you have fewer stat pool points to spend. You also suffer negative effects if any one of your pools is reduced to zero.

When a first stat point pool is reduced to zero, you become "Impaired" and less able to perform. If a second stat point is reduced to zero, you become debilitated--incapable of doing much of anything other than possibly moving. If the third stat pool is reduced to zero, you die.

A second difference: Those same damage levels (such as Impaired) can be reached without losing hit points, by poisons, falling or other significant attacks.

In the extended example above, your character had a pool of 5, after breaking the two codes. If the gas trap had done 5 damage, instead of 3, his Intellect pool would be reduced to zero, and he would have stumbled out of the ruins in bad shape. When confronted by his dishonest employer, he would have had a Difficulty of 5, not 4, because he was Impaired.

Stat Pool Recovery compared to "Healing"

In a d20 system, you need to be healed by a cleric, with a potion, or by extended rests. (Specifics vary by edition.) In Numenera, you can heal stat pool points on your own, up to 4 times a day, by taking progressively longer breaks. Still, while the systems vary in specifics, the concepts align pretty closely.

In the extended example, when the character with his Intellect pool at 2 is confronted by his dishonest employer, he could take a breath and count to 10 (literally) and be more successful...getting back d6+1 stat points, to apply between his pools however he chose. This would increase his Intellect poll to somewhere between 4 and 9. Now he could muster the 3 points of Intellect pool to reduce the difficulty of the negotiation to a 3, so he would only need to roll a 9 or better.

Summary

Some of the stat-related concepts in Numenera translate well, as is the case with stat pool recovery to healing, and stat pool points to hit points. Other concepts don't translate...d20 stats map, but aren't the same thing as Numenera Stat Pools or Stat Edges. They mean different things, and trying to mentally use one for the other will lead you to misunderstand what your characters can do.

This leads to a question...if stat pools mean potential, not ability, this means no character is smarter or stronger than another, so what ARE the differences between characters?

That will be the focus of my second essay, on Abilities, Advantages and Skills.