

Design Documentation

This is one piece of the **Design Documentation** for Frontiers Beta 2026-2. For a guide to the full Design Documentation set and how to read it, see [Designing With Frontiers](#).

If you want the ruleset only, skip to **Default Rules** using the left-side menu, or read the [Frontiers Overview](#) for the condensed version. If you want the reasoning behind those rules, read top to bottom.

This section is the teaching part of the document. It exists to explain how tabletop games answer the question "who is this character?" mechanically. None of this is Frontiers-specific. If you already understand how character identity layers work across systems, you can skip ahead to [Part Two](#).

What Character Identity Layers Do

Every TTRPG has to answer a basic question: what is this character?

The answer always comes from somewhere. Some games use one layer (you are your Class). Some use two (you are your Species and your Class). Some use three (you are your Species, your Background, and your Class). Some use entirely different framings (you are your Playbook, your Crew Role, your Aspects).

Whatever the framing, the layers exist to do three jobs:

- **Define what makes the character mechanically distinct** from every other character at the table.
- **Provide a build path** that connects character creation to long-term progression.
- **Give players a hook for narrative identity** that the mechanics can express.

The choice of how many layers, what each layer does, and how they interact is one of the most consequential calls a designer makes. It shapes character creation, ongoing play, and what kinds of stories the system supports.

How Different Games Handle Identity

The diversity here is enormous. A few examples to make the design space concrete:

Pathfinder (Paizo, 2009/2019) uses three primary layers: Ancestry (what you are biologically), Background (what you did before adventuring), and Class (your active vocation). Each contributes meaningful mechanical content. The three-layer approach gives Pathfinder characters a strong sense of being from somewhere, having lived a life, and being on a path.

Powered by the Apocalypse (Vincent Baker, 2010) collapses identity into a single dominant layer: the **Playbook**. Each Playbook is a tightly designed character class with its own Moves, stats, and identity. Characters don't have ancestry or background as separate mechanical layers. The Playbook is the character.

Mothership (Tuesday Knight Games, 2018) uses a single Class layer plus rolled Stats. Characters don't have species or formal backgrounds. They have a profession (Teamster, Scientist, Marine, Android) and that's the dominant identity hook.

Blades in the Dark (One Seven Design, 2017) layers Crew Role + Playbook. The Crew Role establishes the kind of operation the character runs in; the Playbook establishes their personal specialty. Characters don't have ancestry as a mechanical layer, but they do have heritage and vice tags that color identity narratively.

Fate Core (Evil Hat, 2003) uses Aspects: short freeform descriptive phrases the player writes ("Last of the Sky Knights," "Always Pays My Debts," "Cybernetic Eye"). Aspects can be species, profession, history, or pure character traits. The layer structure is whatever the player chooses to write.

Lasers & Feelings (John Harper, 2013) has one number, one Style word, one Role word. That's the entire identity layer. A "Hot-Shot Pilot" or "Alien Scientist" is the whole character.

The point is not that any of these is wrong. They are answering the same question with different priorities. **Some games make identity a deeply layered system. Some collapse it into one tight Playbook. Some abstract it into freeform tags. Some skip the layered approach entirely.**

The choice cascades into character creation length, build customization depth, narrative coherence, and progression structure.

The Three Roots of Character Identity

Across systems that use multiple identity layers, three recurring categories show up. Sometimes named, sometimes implicit, sometimes collapsed together. Different games slice them differently, but the underlying questions are consistent:

1. What you are (biological inheritance)

The internal stuff. Species, lineage, supernatural status, method of creation, biological or metaphysical category.

This layer answers questions about the character's body and being. Are they human? Elf? Synthetic? Augmented? Cursed? Born from a lineage of something special?

Some games make this a major mechanical layer (D&D 5e Race, Pathfinder Ancestry, Mutants & Masterminds Origins). Some skip it entirely (Mothership, most modern-setting games). Some treat it as flavor only (some PbtA Playbooks).

When games include this layer, it usually grants traits, innate Abilities, or minor stat shifts. Things the character has because of what they are, not what they did or learned.

2. What you did (external inheritance)

The external stuff. Profession, community, social position, formative events, training history, where life took the character before play began.

This layer answers questions about the character's lived experience. Were they a soldier? A scholar? A criminal? A noble? A drifter who never settled?

Pathfinder's Backgrounds handle this. Blades' Heritage and Vice partially handle this. PbtA Playbooks often fold it into the Playbook itself. Burning Wheel makes it the primary identity layer through Lifepath construction.

When games include this layer, it usually grants Skills, Competencies, contacts, or narrative leverage. The things the character knows because of what they did.

3. What you do (trained inheritance)

The practiced stuff. Active vocation, role in the party, what the character is currently becoming. Class, Path, Calling, Playbook.

This layer answers questions about the character's function. What role do they fill? What do they grow into over the course of play? What's their progression vector?

Almost every TTRPG has this layer in some form. It's the most universal of the three. Even Lasers & Feelings has it (your "Role" word). It's the layer most commonly tied to ongoing progression mechanics.

When games include this layer, it usually grants the bulk of the character's mechanical content: Abilities, scaling features, level-based growth, signature mechanics.

How Games Combine the Three

Few games include all three layers as fully equal mechanical contributors. The combinations vary:

- **All three as equals** (D&D 5e, Pathfinder). Race + Background + Class each contribute meaningfully.
- **Trained dominant** (PbtA, Mothership). The Class/Playbook absorbs most identity weight; what-you-are and what-you-did are flavor.

- **External dominant** (Burning Wheel). Lifepaths drive the character; species and class are subsidiary.
- **Trained only** (most modern-setting games). What-you-are and what-you-did don't have separate mechanics; the Class is everything.
- **Fully collapsed** (Lasers & Feelings, Fate). One layer or freeform tags do all the work.

Each combination produces a different character creation experience and a different sense of what makes characters distinct.

The Point

There is no correct number of identity layers. There is no correct distribution of mechanical weight across them.

But there is a correct intentionality: each layer the system includes should have a clear purpose. Layers that do too many overlapping things create blur. Layers that do too little feel vestigial. Layers that aren't actually doing identity work shouldn't be on the sheet.

A designer's most consequential decision in this layer is **how many roots to use, and what each one does**. Three layers is the maximum useful count for most games. Beyond that, layers start to overlap or compete. One layer is the minimum, and below that, characters start to feel undifferentiated.

The choice signals what kind of stories the system tells. Heavy on biological inheritance signals stories about being. Heavy on external inheritance signals stories about history. Heavy on trained inheritance signals stories about becoming.

This section covers the specific choices *Frontiers* made and the reasoning behind them. The earlier section explained the field. This section explains the answer.

The Design Question

When designing *Frontiers*' character system, the goal was an identity layer that:

- Used all three roots without forcing every system to fill them the same way
- Gave each layer a clear philosophical purpose without locking down its mechanical contributions
- Provided templates designers could build from, while leaving the specifics to each system
- Supported both single-Archetype and multi-Archetype progression
- Used a milestone-driven advancement system that rewarded narrative beats rather than pure XP grinding

Most existing systems either prescribe rigid layer rules (D&D 5e tells you exactly what your Race grants) or collapse identity into one dominant layer (PbtA Playbooks). Frontiers wanted to give designers the structure of three layers without locking what each one does.

That goal narrowed the design space:

Goal	Reasoning	Constraint
Three-layer triad	Matches the three roots framework	Argues for Origin/Background/Archetype as defaults
Open mechanical contributions	Different genres need different layer weight	Argues against locking what each layer must grant
Milestone advancement	Connects progression to narrative	Argues against pure XP-driven growth
Multi-Archetype permissive	Players should be able to grow in multiple directions	Argues for open multi-class as default
10 Levels per Archetype	Progression should feel meaningful but bounded	Argues for soft caps

The Tradeoffs Considered

Frontiers studied several identity architectures:

Single-layer systems (PbtA, Mothership). Maximum clarity, fast character creation. But limited expressive range, where characters with different builds can feel mechanically similar.

Two-layer systems (Mörk Borg with class + Optional Origin tables). Compact, easy to learn. But sometimes feels like "what you are + what you do" without acknowledging "what you did."

Three-layer systems (D&D 5e, Pathfinder). Rich character expression. But can feel mechanically prescriptive, and the layers often overlap (Background grants skills, but so do Class and Race in some cases).

Lifepath systems (Burning Wheel, Traveller). Maximum lived-history feel. But long character creation and locked sequence of events.

The answer Frontiers landed on: **three layers (Origin, Background, Archetype), each with a clear philosophical purpose, with mechanical contributions left as templates rather than rules.**

Frontiers' Answer — The Three-Layer Triad

Frontiers uses three identity layers, each tied to one of the three roots:

Layer	Root	Question Answered
Origin	Biological inheritance	What are you?
Background	External inheritance	What did you do?
Archetype	Trained inheritance	What do you do?

Each layer has a clear philosophical purpose. None of them have required mechanical contributions. What each grants is system-defined. But Frontiers provides templates for what each typically grants, so designers can build with reference points.

Why Three Layers

Three is the maximum useful count for character identity layers. Beyond three, layers start overlapping or competing. Below three, the system loses one of the three core identity questions.

Three lets each question stand alone:

- A player can have a strong sense of what their character is (Origin)
- A player can have a strong sense of what their character did before (Background)
- A player can have a strong sense of what their character is becoming (Archetype)

These three questions are independent. A character can be a Synthetic (Origin) who worked as a Spacer (Background) and trained as a Hacker (Archetype). Each layer answers its own question without overlapping the others.

A two-layer system would have to fold one of these into another. A four-layer system would have to invent a fourth question, and most attempts at this end up duplicating one of the three roots.

Why Open Mechanical Contributions

The 2026-1 version of Frontiers prescribed what each layer mechanically granted. Origin granted HP. Background granted Skills. Archetype granted Abilities. This was clean but constraining. A system where Origin should grant Abilities (a Dragon-Origin breath weapon) had to fight the engine's defaults.

The 2026-2 approach is to give each layer a **philosophical purpose** and let designers decide what mechanical contributions match that purpose. A fantasy system might want Origin to grant Abilities. A sci-fi system might want Origin to be flavor only. A horror system might want Origin to be a destabilizing influence (cursed bloodlines, supernatural taint). All of these are valid expressions of the same Origin layer.

What stays constant is the question each layer answers. Origin is always about biological inheritance. Background is always about external inheritance. Archetype is always about trained inheritance. The mechanical shape of each is system-defined.

Templates, Not Rules

Frontiers provides templates for what each layer typically grants. These are starting points for designers, not engine requirements:

Origin Template (Default Suggestion): - 1 small innate Ability or trait reflecting what the character is - Optional minor Attribute influence (system-defined) - Narrative grounding for biology, lineage, or creation

Background Template (Default Suggestion): - 2-3 starting Skills reflecting trained expertise - 1-2 Competencies reflecting professional familiarity - Narrative leverage (contacts, reputation, situational expertise)

Archetype Template (Default Suggestion): - HP scaling per Level - $\nearrow$ Energy growth per Level - Abilities granted at each Level - Competencies that fit the role - Vector Mark eligibility (the progression engine)

These templates produce a balanced character without overlap. A system can adopt them as written or modify any of them to fit genre and tone.

Genre Examples

The triad works across genres. A few examples to show the range:

Layer	Fantasy	Sci-Fi	Horror	Modern
Origin	Elf, Dwarf, Tiefling	Augmented Human, Synthetic, Xenomorph Hybrid	Cursed Bloodline, Unhallowed, Ordinary	Native, Naturalized, Unbound
Background	Soldier, Scholar, Smuggler	Spacer, Corporate Agent, Frontier Medic	Investigator, Survivor, Occultist	Detective, Journalist, Engineer
Archetype	Warrior, Mage, Rogue	Marine, Hacker, Pilot	Hunter, Scholar, Witness	Operative, Specialist, Investigator

The pattern is consistent: Origin defines what they are, Background defines what they did, Archetype defines what they do. The specifics shift to fit the setting.

Frontiers' Answer — Vector Marks

Vector Marks are Frontiers' progression mechanism. Three Marks gained = one Level advanced. The Marks themselves are the build choices that shape how a character grows.

Why Marks Instead of XP

Traditional XP systems award experience for combat, exploration, or specific milestones. The math determines when a character levels up.

Vector Marks invert this. The GM grants Marks when narrative milestones happen. Marks are not abstract experience. They're moments of growth. A character earns a Mark by surviving a hard fight, finishing an arc, returning home changed, mastering something new, or reaching a significant turn in the story.

This connects progression to fiction directly. A character who never has meaningful narrative beats doesn't level. A character who experiences many transformative moments grows quickly.

Why Three Marks per Level

Three Marks per Level creates a pacing rhythm. A single Mark is a small step. Three Marks together is a Level: a major shift in capability.

The three-Mark structure also lets each Level feel built rather than granted. A player gaining a Level chose three specific Marks along the way. Each Mark expresses a build decision (what stat to raise, what Ability to add, what training to pursue). The Level is the sum of those decisions.

This produces character growth that feels personalized. Two characters reaching Level 5 won't have made the same Mark choices, so they'll feel mechanically different even within the same Archetype.

When Marks Should Be Granted

Marks are GM-granted at narrative milestones. Common triggers:

- **End of a major scene or arc.** A turning point in the story warrants a Mark.
- **Surviving a significant Encounter.** A hard fight or a near-death moment can grant a Mark.
- **Achieving a defined goal.** Completing a quest, recovering an artifact, defeating a major foe.
- **Personal milestones.** A character coming to terms with their past, mastering a skill, forging a critical bond.
- **End of a session.** Some tables grant a Mark at the end of each session as a baseline pacing tool.

The default pacing is roughly one Mark per session, with extra Marks granted for major story moments. This gives players a Level every three sessions on average, with faster growth when the story is dense and slower growth during quiet stretches.

Systems built on Frontiers may prescribe a stricter pacing (one Mark per session, period) or a looser one (Marks awarded purely by narrative judgment) depending on tone.

Mark Options

When a player earns a Mark, they choose one of the following Mark types. The same Mark type cannot be selected more than once per Level. A player cannot get three Attribute Marks for one Level. Diversity is enforced.

Attribute Mark. Increase two different Attributes by 1 each (respecting the 1-10 cap).

Skill Mark. Either gain one new specific Skill, OR increase one Skill Category modifier by +1 (toward the +5 cap).

Ability Mark. Gain one new Ability with Level $\leq$ Reference Level + 2. Some Abilities may have additional requirements set by their design.

Energy Mark. Increase maximum $\nearrow$ Energy by 1.

Additional Mark. A system-specific Mark type defined by the system designer. This is the engine's hook for system-level expansion.

Designers may add new Mark types via the Additional Mark slot or by extending the engine directly.

Frontiers' Answer — Multi-Archetype Progression

Frontiers permits multi-Archotyping by default. A character can take Levels in multiple Archetypes over their career.

When a player advances a Level, they choose which Archetype receives the Level. They gain that Archetype's per-Level features (HP Mod, Abilities granted at that Level, Competencies if any).

Total Character Level is the sum of all Archetype Levels and is used for engine-wide comparisons (Reference Level, Equipment interaction).

Archetype Level is the Level within a specific Archetype and is used to determine which features that Archetype grants at that point.

A character with 3 Levels in Warrior and 2 Levels in Mage has: - Total Character Level 5 (Reference Level 5) - Warrior Archetype Level 3 (gets Warrior's Level 3 features) - Mage Archetype Level 2 (gets Mage's Level 2 features)

When they advance again, they choose which Archetype grows. They cannot exceed Level 10 in any single Archetype, and the engine soft-caps total Character Level at 20.

Systems may impose stricter restrictions on multi-Archotyping (single-Archetype lock, prerequisite gates, multi-class taxes) but the engine default is permissive.

Why Permissive Multi-Archetype

Multi-Archotyping lets characters grow in multiple directions without forcing them into rigid class identity. A Warrior who takes a few Mage Levels feels like a character who learned magic, not a broken build.

The cost is that the engine has to handle multi-Archetype interactions cleanly. The Reference Level system makes this work: total Character Level governs cross-system math (Energy interaction with Equipment, Ability scaling), while individual Archetype Levels govern what each Archetype grants.

Restrictive variants are available for systems that want stronger thematic identity per Archetype (the Single-Archetype Lock variant covers this).

Everything below this point is the actual mechanics. The earlier sections explained the theory. This section explains how it runs at the table.

Character Identity Layers

Every character is built from three layers:

Layer	Question	Root
Origin	What are you?	Biological inheritance
Background	What did you do?	External inheritance
Archetype	What do you do?	Trained inheritance

The mechanical contributions of each layer are system-defined. The default templates below are starting points, not requirements.

Origin

Origin represents what the character is biologically and metaphysically. It covers species, lineage, creation, and innate nature.

Origin answers questions like: - What is your physical or metaphysical form? - What are you biologically? - What innate traits shape you?

Origin Default Template

Origin typically provides: - One small innate Ability or trait - Optional minor Attribute influence (if the system uses it) - Narrative grounding for biology, lineage, or creation method

Origins do not scale by default. If an Origin scales (a Dragon's breath growing more potent with Level), this is implemented through Dynamic Level Abilities (see the Abilities design doc).

Origin Design Guidance

When designing Origins: - Keep them broad enough that players can express variation within the same Origin. - Avoid making Origins mandatory for power builds. Small identity-defining traits work better than large numerical bonuses. - Treat Origin as "baseline biology and being" rather than "training."

A good Origin grants something the character has because of what they are, not what they earned. If a feature feels learned, it probably belongs to Background or Archetype.

Background

Background represents the character's external inheritance: their lived experience, profession, social position, and the world that shaped them before play began.

Background answers questions like: - What did you practice? - What world did you come from? - What expertise did you develop before becoming extraordinary?

Background Default Template

Background typically provides: - 2-3 starting Skills - 1-2 Competencies - Narrative leverage (contacts, reputation, situational expertise)

Background does not scale by default. To keep a Background mechanically relevant long-term, systems should add narrative leverage hooks rather than scaling bonuses.

Background Design Guidance

When designing Backgrounds: - Background is the natural home for Skills and Competencies. - Background should create gameplay texture: contacts, obligations, reputations, situational leverage. - A good Background reflects what the character did repeatedly enough to be trained.

A character is competent because of their Background. They become extraordinary because of their Archetype.

Archetype

Archetype represents the character's trained inheritance: their active vocation, role in the party, and progression vector.

Archetype answers questions like: - What role do you fill now? - How do you grow stronger? - What defines your method of impact?

Archetype Default Template

Archetype typically provides: - HP scaling per Level (Archetype HP Modifier, typically +4 to +8) - Energy growth per Level - Abilities at each Level - Competencies that fit the role - Eligibility for Vector Marks (the progression engine)

Each Archetype contains **10 Levels**. At each Level, the character should gain a meaningful benefit (an Ability, a Competency, an additional Skill slot, scaling features, or similar).

Archetype Design Guidance

When designing Archetypes: - Ensure every Level grants something meaningful. Avoid "dead Levels." - Make sure Abilities are distributed to create a clear identity early, then deepen it. - Early Levels (1-3) should establish the core loop of the Archetype. - Mid Levels (4-7) should expand tactical breadth or reliability. - High Levels (8-10) should introduce rule-bending or signature mastery.

Archetype is the engine's primary long-term differentiation tool. It should carry the most distinctive mechanical content.

Advancement

Frontiers uses **Vector Mark advancement**. Three Vector Marks earned = one Level gained.

Vector Marks are GM-granted at narrative milestones (see Mark Granting below). When a Mark is earned, the player chooses one Mark type. The same Mark type cannot be selected more than once between Levels.

When the player has accumulated 3 Marks, they advance one Level.

Mark Types

Mark	Effect
Attribute Mark	Increase two different Attributes by 1 each (respecting the 1-10 cap)
Skill Mark	Gain one new specific Skill, OR increase one Skill Category modifier by +1 (toward the +5 cap)
Ability Mark	Gain one new Ability with Level $\leq$ (Reference Level + 2). Some Abilities may have additional requirements set by their design
Energy Mark	Increase maximum $\nearrow$ Energy by 1
Additional Mark	A system-specific Mark type defined by the system designer

Each Mark can only be selected once per Level. Diversity is enforced.

Mark Granting

The GM grants Marks at narrative milestones. The default pacing is roughly **one Mark per session**, with extra Marks awarded for major story moments. This produces a Level every ~3 sessions on average.

Common Mark triggers: - End of a major scene or arc - Surviving a significant Encounter - Achieving a defined goal - Personal milestones (mastering a skill, forging a critical bond, coming to terms with the past) - End of a session (as a baseline pacing tool)

Systems may prescribe stricter pacing (e.g., "one Mark per session, no extras") or looser pacing (purely narrative judgment) depending on tone.

Level Up Procedure

When a player accumulates 3 Marks:

1. Increase total Character Level by 1.
2. Choose which Archetype receives the new Level (for multi-Archetype characters).
3. Gain that Archetype's Level features (HP Mod, Abilities granted at that Level, Competencies if any).
4. Recalculate any Derivatives affected by permanent changes.
5. Recalculate Equipment Level interaction if total Character Level changed (see the Equipment design doc).
6. Recalculate Maximum HP retroactively if $\blacklozenge$ Vigor changed (see the Attributes & Derivatives design doc).

Leveling does not automatically restore $\nearrow$ Energy unless the system explicitly defines this.

Multi-Archetype Progression

A character may take Levels in multiple Archetypes. When advancing a Level, the player chooses which Archetype gets the new Level.

Single Archetype maximum: 10 Levels.

Total Character Level soft cap: 20.

Beyond Level 20 is system-defined territory.

Multi-Archetype Mechanical Notes

When a character takes their first Level in a new Archetype (multi-Archotyping for the first time):

- They gain the Archetype's per-Level features for that Level (HP Mod, Abilities granted at Level 1 of the new Archetype, Competencies if any).
- They do **not** gain a new "Level 1 starter package" (no new starting Attribute Points, no new starting Skills, no new starting Energy pool).

This rule prevents multi-Archotyping from being mathematically dominant. A multi-class character grows broader, not exponentially stronger.

Systems may modify this rule depending on tone. Some systems may want multi-Archotyping to feel more rewarding (granting more starter benefits); others may want it more restrictive (multi-class taxes, prerequisite Archetype features). The engine default is the middle ground.

Starting Values

At Level 1, characters typically begin with:

Resource	Default
Attribute Points to distribute	10
Maximum $\nearrow$ Energy	3
Skills	3 (typically from Background)
Abilities	2 of Level 3 or lower

These values produce a competent starting character without overshadowing later progression.

Reasoning for Starting Values

10 Attribute Points across 4 stats: Average 2.5 per stat (Mod ~+1) with room to specialize one stat to 4-5 (Mod +2). Produces a "competent novice" rather than a "demigod novice." Players can dump one stat to 1 for a +3 specialization, but this is a meaningful sacrifice.

3 ✂Energy at Level 1: A small buffer that allows for one above-Level Ability use or two minor pushes before Overspending. Encourages Energy to feel scarce in early play, which makes early Encounters tense and meaningful.

3 Skills (from Background): Enough to feel trained without overloading the sheet. A starting character has clear narrow expertise without being a generalist.

2 Abilities of Level 3 or lower: At least one signature move plus one supporting move. Both become free to use when the character reaches Reference Level 3 (which happens quickly), so early progression is rewarding without making starting characters feel underpowered.

Systems may modify these values to match tone. A grittier system might use lower starting values (8 Attribute Points, 2 Energy, 2 Skills, 1 Ability). A heroic system might use higher (12 Points, 5 Energy, 4 Skills, 3 Abilities). The defaults target the middle.

Character Creation Procedure

This procedure is recommended but not required. It demonstrates the engine's intended creation flow.

Step 1 — Establish Concept

Define: - Core identity - Intended playstyle - Narrative tone

Concept precedes mechanics.

Step 2 — Choose Origin

Select or define Origin.

Apply: - Any innate Ability or trait the Origin grants - Any Attribute influence the Origin provides (if the system uses this)

Step 3 — Choose Background

Select or define Background.

Apply: - Starting Skills (typically 2-3) - Starting Competencies (typically 1-2) - Any narrative leverage hooks

Step 4 — Assign Attributes

Distribute 10 Attribute Points across the four Attributes (♦Vigor, □Finesse, □Acuity, ✱Resolve).

Attributes start at 1 (the floor). Distributing 10 Points spreads them across the stats. For example: 4/3/2/1, or 5/3/2/1, or 7/1/1/1.

After assignment: - Calculate Attribute Modifiers - Recalculate any Derivatives that depend on Attributes

Step 5 — Choose Archetype

Select starting Archetype and gain Level 1 benefits: - HP per Level 1 = ♦Vigor Modifier + Archetype HP Modifier - Maximum ⚡Energy = 3 (default starting value) - Any Abilities the Archetype grants at Level 1 - Any Competencies the Archetype grants

If the Archetype grants starting Abilities and the system allows player choice, select within the allowed Level range (typically Level 3 or lower for Level 1 characters).

Step 6 — Finalize Resources

Calculate or confirm: - ⚡HP (from Vigor + Archetype HP Modifier) - Maximum ⚡Energy (3 by default) - □Physical Defense and □Mental Defense (5 + highest of relevant Mod pair + Equipment, see the Attributes & Derivatives design doc) - Maximum ☹Wounds (1 + Vigor Mod) and Maximum ☹Fatigue (1 + Resolve Mod) - ●Awareness (1 + Acuity Mod) and ∞Intuition (1 + Resolve Mod) - ➡MP (3 + Finesse Mod) - Initiative Value (Archetype-provided base, adjustable ±Finesse Mod at Encounter start)

Step 7 — Choose Starting Equipment

Select or be assigned starting Equipment per the system's design. Apply any ⚡Energy interaction with Enhanced items above Reference Level 1 (see the Equipment design doc).

Tuning the Feel

The default rules give Frontiers' baseline feel. The knobs below let designers tune that feel without breaking the engine.

Mark Pacing

How often Marks are granted shapes how fast characters grow.

Pacing	Effect	Good for
Slow (1 Mark per 2 sessions)	Slow growth, each Level feels major	Long campaigns, slow burn
Default (1 Mark per session, plus story bonuses)	Balanced. Level every 2-3 sessions	Most Frontiers-based systems
Fast (2 Marks per session)	Quick growth, characters feel powerful fast	Heroic or short campaigns

Multi-Archetype Strictness

How much multi-Archotyping is allowed shapes character build identity.

- **Permissive (default).** Players can multi-Archetype freely. Builds feel flexible.
- **Single-Archetype Lock.** Players cannot multi-Archetype. Strong thematic identity per Archetype.
- **Hybrid.** Multi-Archotyping requires meeting specific Archetype prerequisites (Reference Level 5 in primary Archetype before opening a second).

Starting Power Level

The default starting values produce competent novices. Variations:

- **Gritty start.** 8 Attribute Points, 2 Energy, 2 Skills, 1 Ability. Characters feel mortal and underpowered early.
- **Default.** 10 Points, 3 Energy, 3 Skills, 2 Abilities.
- **Heroic start.** 12 Points, 5 Energy, 4 Skills, 3 Abilities. Characters feel capable and ready for adventure.

Layer Weight Distribution

How much each layer contributes mechanically shapes which root dominates.

- **Origin-heavy.** Origins grant Abilities and meaningful traits. Characters feel defined by what they are. Good for transformation, mythic, or species-driven systems.
 - **Background-heavy.** Backgrounds grant scaling Skills or recurring narrative leverage. Characters feel defined by their history. Good for intrigue, lifepath-style, or mature dramatic systems.
 - **Archetype-heavy (default).** Archetypes carry the bulk of mechanical identity. Characters feel defined by their vocation. Good for most action-adventure or class-based games.
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Edge Cases

The following rulings apply unless a specific rule explicitly overrides them.

Attribute Marks and the Attribute Cap. If an Attribute Mark would increase an Attribute beyond the system's defined cap (default 10): - The increase cannot exceed the cap. - The second Attribute increase must still be applied to a different Attribute. - If no legal Attribute exists, the Mark cannot be selected.

Attribute increases apply immediately and trigger immediate Derivative recalculation.

Same Mark Type Selected Twice in One Level. A Mark type cannot be selected more than once between Levels. If a player has used an Attribute Mark since their last Level Up, they cannot select another Attribute Mark until they Level.

This forces diversity across Marks within a Level.

Derivative Recalculation on Level Up. When a character Levels up: - Recalculate Derivatives affected by permanent Attribute changes - Recalculate maximum $\nearrow$ Energy if Energy Marks were selected - Recalculate Equipment Level interaction if total Character Level changed - Recalculate Maximum HP retroactively if $\blacklozenge$ Vigor changed (see the Attributes & Derivatives design doc)

Multi-Archetype Ability Legality. If a character gains an Ability through an Ability Mark, the Ability's Level must be $\leq$ (Reference Level + 2). Reference Level is total Character Level for PCs.

Some Abilities may have additional requirements (Archetype prerequisites, Skill requirements, Origin restrictions) defined by the system designer.

Level Decrease. If a system effect reduces a character's Level: - Remove the most recently gained Archetype Level - Remove any features granted at that Level - Recalculate total Character Level - Recalculate Equipment Level interaction - Do not retroactively remove previously selected Vector Marks unless the system explicitly defines that behavior

Level reduction is rare and should be defined explicitly by the system that uses it.

Energy Mark Timing. If an Energy Mark increases maximum $\leq$ Energy: - The maximum increases immediately - Current $\leq$ Energy does not automatically increase unless the system defines it

If a Level-up removes a maximum $\leq$ Energy penalty (from previously over-Level Equipment that's now within the new Reference Level): - Maximum increases immediately - Current Energy remains unchanged

Reassigning or Replacing an Archetype. If a system allows retraining or Archetype replacement: - Remove all benefits granted by the replaced Archetype Levels - Recalculate Derivatives - Re-evaluate Ability legality - Re-evaluate Equipment interaction

The engine does not define retraining rules by default. Systems implement this as needed.

Vector Marks Without Archetype Eligibility. By default, Vector Marks are tied to Archetype progression. A Mark advances the character toward a Level in their chosen Archetype. Some systems may decouple Marks from Archetype progression (e.g., Marks could grant standalone benefits without advancing an Archetype Level). The engine default keeps them tied.

Variants

Variants modify how Characters are built or progressed while preserving the three-layer triad.

Milestone Advancement Variant

What changes: Replace Vector Marks with pure milestone leveling. Characters gain a Level when: - A major narrative goal is completed - A system-defined milestone is reached

Vector Marks are removed. Level-up benefits are granted immediately as a package.

What stays: Energy interaction, Equipment interaction, Ability legality.

What shifts: - Simplifies tracking - Reduces granular build decisions - Increases narrative pacing control

Use when: Building a system where pacing should be entirely GM-driven.

Expanded Mark Economy Variant

What changes: Increase Marks required per Level from 3 to 4 or 5.

Optionally, grant minor benefits at each Mark and a major benefit at the final Mark of a Level.

What stays: Mark types, advancement structure.

What shifts: - Slows progression - Encourages incremental growth - Makes build identity feel more gradual

Use when: Building a long-campaign system where each Level should feel earned.

Single-Archetype Lock Variant

What changes: Characters may not multi-Archetype. All Levels must be taken in the starting Archetype.

What stays: Origin, Background, Vector Marks, all other systems.

What shifts: - Stronger thematic identity per Archetype - Cleaner scaling math - Reduces build complexity

Use when: Building a tightly themed system where Archetype identity is sacred.

Background Scaling Variant

What changes: Allow Background to scale at specific Level thresholds (e.g., at Levels 5 and 10, Background grants additional Skill or narrative benefit).

What stays: Origin and Archetype mechanics.

What shifts: - Keeps early identity relevant throughout play - Encourages story continuity tied to Background - Must be kept mechanically modest to avoid overshadowing Archetype

Use when: Building a system where lived history should remain mechanically meaningful.

Origin-Forward Variant

What changes: Origins grant scaling Abilities or expanded mechanical content. Archetype becomes lighter.

What stays: Three-layer structure.

What shifts: - Characters feel defined by their nature rather than their training - Good for transformation, evolution, or species-driven systems - Requires careful balance to avoid Origin dominating

Use when: Building a system where biological or metaphysical identity should be the dominant mechanical layer (high-fantasy lineage games, science-fantasy transformation games).

Alternatives

Alternatives substantially reframe Character structure. Adopting these requires recalibration of Ability access, Energy, and progression pacing.

No Archetype Alternative

Core change: Remove Archetypes entirely. Characters progress through: - Attribute increases via Marks - Ability acquisition via Marks - Skill acquisition via Marks

Abilities are unlocked independently of class structure.

What you gain: - Full open build freedom - No pre-defined role identity

What you lose: - Strong thematic identity from class structure - HP scaling tied to a clear durability identity - The natural progression engine that Archetype Levels provide

Use when: Building a fully open-build system where characters define themselves entirely through Mark choices.

Two-Layer Alternative (Origin + Path)

Core change: Merge Background and Archetype into a single scaling Path.

Character structure becomes: - Origin (foundation) - Path (progression)

Path provides both starting training and scaling Abilities.

What you gain: - Simplified identity layers - Reduced redundancy - Works well in tightly themed systems

What you lose: - The distinction between lived history and active vocation - The Background-as-narrative-leverage hook

Use when: Building a system where the "what you did" and "what you do" questions are essentially the same (e.g., legacy/inheritance-driven systems).

Skill-Driven Alternative

Core change: Replace Archetype scaling with Skill-based advancement.

Characters Level by: - Increasing Skills via Marks - Unlocking Skill thresholds - Gaining Abilities tied to Skill ranks

What you gain: - Emphasizes training over class identity - Removes class rigidity

What you lose: - Class-defined character roles - The Archetype-as-progression-engine identity

Use when: Building a strongly skill-focused system (espionage, detective fiction, heist games).

Narrative Role Alternative

Core change: Remove numeric Level entirely. Characters advance by: - Unlocking narrative permissions - Gaining role-based authority - Expanding story impact

Attributes and Abilities may remain static or grow minimally.

What you gain: - Strong narrative focus - Minimal numeric escalation - Character growth feels like story growth

What you lose: - Tactical depth tied to numerical progression - Mechanical satisfaction of leveling up

Use when: Building a story-focused system where characters should grow in authority rather than capability.

A Note to System Designers

Characters in Frontiers are built from three independent identity questions: what you are (Origin), what you did (Background), and what you do (Archetype). Each layer answers its own question without overlapping the others.

The engine does not lock down what each layer mechanically grants. The default templates suggest balanced starting points, but designers are free to shift mechanical weight between layers to match genre and tone. A transformation-focused system might make Origin dominant. A lifepath-focused system might make Background dominant. A class-focused system might make Archetype dominant. All are valid.

A system that adopts Frontiers' defaults inherits a particular feel: - Three identity layers, each tied to a clear root - Vector Marks as a milestone-driven progression engine - Permissive multi-Archotyping with Reference Level math handling the cross-system interactions - Starting values that produce competent novices - Open mechanical contributions per layer, with templates as starting points

This feel is deliberate and tuned.

Modifying the defaults with a Variant or an Alternative changes that feel. Locking single Archetype, restructuring the layer count, or swapping Marks for milestones each produce different systems at the table.

Like everything in Frontiers, you are open as a designer to massively modify what Frontiers offers in favor of a method that works best for your system. This document is just giving you the tools and concepts Frontiers considered when deciding its own default engine rules.

For the engine's broader design philosophy, modularity, the Variant and Alternative convention, and how to build on Frontiers, see **Designing With Frontiers**.

For the condensed working ruleset, see the **Frontiers Overview**.