

Chapter 51 - System Research II

Figuring out the System's logic was like trying to solve a puzzle with half the pieces missing.

'How am I ever supposed to guess what the System has up its sleeve...?' was the question that echoed in my mind as I delved into the mystery of its rules.

Neon Dragons was already packed with a diverse set of Skills, making it challenging to pinpoint what new additions the G.E.M.A. System deemed necessary. There had been so many Skills, in-fact, that many critics and players alike had actually deducted points on their reviews for the game, simply due to the sheer number of “useless” seeming Skills.

If only they knew what kind of import some of those Skills would end up having for me.

Skills like [Maid] and [Manifestation], which I had stumbled upon unexpectedly and weren't part of the original game, threw me for a loop with their unexpected utility and origin.

Then there was [Juggling], which, while it made sense as a Skill for enhancing reflexes, blurred the lines for me between mere physical exercise and “Skill-worthy” endeavours.

It inevitably made me question, *'Why aren't [Push-Ups], [Sit-Ups], or [Resistance-Training] considered Skills when they're essentially body training, akin to how [Juggling] trains Reflex?'*

The distinction between what constituted a simple exercise and what qualified as a Skill was something I was struggling to figure out, regardless of how I wrote down each of my Skills on my cerebral interface's notepad and tried to connect the dots.

[Slicer] was the one skill I stumbled upon that had just clicked for me.

It filled a niche that, while not covered in the original game, was undoubtedly valuable and didn't have a direct counterpart.

Sure, [Ripper] was in the game, dealing with similar themes of human bodies, surgeries, and cybernetics. Yet, when you got down to the nitty-gritty, [Ripper] and [Slicer] approached these themes from markedly different angles.

[Slicer] was all about the finesse and precision required in surgery, whereas [Ripper] leaned more towards the logistics, like choosing the right meds to prevent cybernetic rejection or understanding the basic pre- and post-surgery needs. While it ultimately also dealt with surgery at later levels, [Slicer] was the decidedly more direct approach to it.

This distinction made [Slicer] not just logical, but downright *necessary* in this world—a gap filled by the System's ingenuity.

It had always bugged me that the game acknowledged ripper-docs without giving due credit to the intricate work of slicers. The absence of a more generalistic medicinal skill had seemed like a slight to slicers' critical role, but with [Slicer] now part of the mix, it felt like a rectification of that oversight.

All this pondering didn't get me any closer to unravelling how the System distinguished routine actions from those worthy of a [Skill], however.

The insights I'd gained about the System's XP mechanics compounded the issue further.

Considering that each action had to be more than halfway completed to earn XP or unlock a [Skill], the challenge wasn't just identifying actions that *could* yield XP for unknown [Skills] but defining those actions with clear boundaries as well.

Take jogging, as an example.

How were you to pinpoint the finish line for a jog? While one might think it ended when you stopped, the System was almost certainly going to demand more, rejecting the idea you could game XP by starting and stopping jogs every second or so for Body Attribute gains.

It implied the System had to have set a minimum threshold of effort for *any* activity to count as "initiated". A jog, then, would presumably need a solid 5-10 minutes of continuous effort to qualify for XP or to unlock a related [Skill].

With a jog, this was quite simple to deduce and potentially test, but what about [Maid], as a contra?

If I had simply tidied up a bit of mine and Gabriel's room just because it needed doing, but only done so a bit at a time due to laziness or myriad other, similar reasons, ultimately without aiming to hit any specific target, I'd likely never have stumbled upon the hidden, elusive mark necessary for that initial XP drop to unlock the [Skill].

It'd be as if [Maid] hadn't existed for me, all because my efforts fell short of some unknown benchmark that I had no way of knowing about.

'Man, a guide or something to clue me in on what [Skills] are even out there would be a complete game-changer...' I thought, the annoyance building as I dwelled on this conundrum for what felt like forever.

In my growing exasperation, I had even combed through the G.E.M.A. System's interface, half-hoping I'd missed a guide or a help feature, but came up empty.

Some options remained inaccessible, simply greyed out with no option to interface with them, their purposes obscured and without any hints on how to activate them either.

Maybe one of these hidden features could offer the guidance I sought, but their secrets remained firmly locked away for now.

I let out a frustrated sigh, the sense of being at a standstill becoming palpable.

'Looks like I'll need to pay closer attention to my actions, stretching them out if necessary, to hit those unseen [Skill] activation markers,' I mused, making a mental note of this strategy as a stopgap until I could unravel more of the System's intricacies. *'For the moment, revisiting all those moments while watching let's plays and playthroughs where I wondered, "Why isn't*

this a [Skill]?" seems like my best bet, I guess. It's a way to start, at least, and who knows? It might just reveal more about how the System ticks if I'm lucky.'

Rising from the kitchen chair, I went to retrieve my scattered [Tailoring] materials, deciding to pack them away for another day. My enthusiasm for [Tailoring] had thoroughly waned after the day's exhaustive efforts to even just unlock it.

My gaze then turned to my [Medicine] ingredients, sparking the realisation of a significant hurdle in my quest for this Skill's unlock and mastery: The lack of proper lab equipment.

Mixing chemicals, especially those with a high toxicity level, without precise measurements was a recipe for disaster. I needed accurate scales, a clean workspace, and a variety of containers capable of handling chemical reactions without contaminating the concoctions.

Ideally, glass or quartz beakers would fit the bill, though I was fairly certain our apartment was devoid of any such specialised gear.

I rummaged through our kitchen, silently grateful for Valeria's strange list of priorities which included an insistence on a well-equipped kitchen despite no one in the family actually doing any home-cooking at all.

Among the finds were several pans and pots in varying sizes, and to my surprise, some rather sturdy, basic kitchen gadgets including an electric mixer, a hand blender, and an array of spoons, ladles, and spatulas.

"Hmm..." I mused aloud, eyeing the kitchen tools I'd spread out on the table. "Which of these could actually be useful?" After a brief moment of consideration, I selected the second smallest pot, along with the electric mixer, a spoon, and all the ladles at hand, then headed to the stove.

"I really hope this works," I whispered to myself, positioning the pot on the induction top. My first task was to produce pure water, or rather, purer water—it was unlikely I'd manage anything close to perfection with the equipment I had on hand—, meaning I'd have to distil some as best as I could manage.

Thankfully, my penchant for watching random chemistry videos online had given me a rough idea of how to accomplish this without ending in disaster; or so I hoped.

I filled the pot with tap water, uncertain of its purity, and set it to boil. Then, taking the smallest pot, I arranged it to catch the steam, using the lid placed askew and a ladle to direct the condensation into the smaller vessel. I cranked the heat to maximum and waited, hoping for the water to evaporate and leave me with my makeshift distilled water in the collection pot.

Rigging up a makeshift distillation setup to purify water might not have been the pinnacle of efficiency, and the end product was hardly lab-grade, but it beat making another trip outside the apartment today.

Once I had my somewhat cleaner water, I turned my attention to the stash of chemicals I'd snagged earlier.

"Alright, let's get this mixture right..." I pondered, recognizing the lack of precision tools like a scale in the kitchen could turn this experiment from risky to downright hazardous. A wrong ratio could end up with an unintended side-product that released some seriously toxic fumes, a mistake I wasn't exactly keen on making.

After another thorough, yet fruitless search for a scale—hoping against hope I'd overlooked one—I let out a frustrated sigh. "Damnit..."

Flicking through the options on my cerebral interface, I clung to the hope that somewhere in the advanced tech implanted in my head, there lay a feature that could approximate a scale. After all, in a world as advanced as this, it seemed absurd not to have some form of built-in measurement tools available, right?

To my immense relief and outright joy, I stumbled across a visual scale buried within the plethora of options my entry-level cybernetic implant offered.

"Yes!" I couldn't help but celebrate with a punch into the air before getting down to business with a small spoon and the first bag of chemicals.

As I poured the powder onto the spoon, a virtual ring appeared around its edge, analysing the volume of the ingredients in a blink, giving me a rough estimate of the weight.

To dial in the accuracy, I fed the app the specific name of the chemical, ensuring it accounted for the correct density and weight, aiming to minimise the chance for any potential mishaps, considering the rough and imprecise nature of this whole endeavour.

Thankfully, Neon Dragons hadn't been one of those games that oversimplified crafting into just mixing a bag of "chemical A" with a bag of "chemical B" to receive the desired recipe's output.

Instead, it had demanded precise measurements and genuine effort for concocting recipes, such as dialling in proper temperatures, mixing things properly and all the steps that could realistically be needed to truly craft a certain item, leaving me surprisingly well-prepared for this moment, despite my last real-life encounter with chemistry being in the sixth grade and never venturing into the realm of medicine creation at all.

After getting the first ingredient right, the rest of the process unfolded smoothly.

I added them to the semi-distilled water in the pot and brought it to a boil, letting the hand-mixer do its job to prevent any chance of burning. Keeping a cautious distance in case my memory of the recipe was off and I accidentally produced a hazardous byproduct, I watched anxiously.

Thankfully, my precautions proved unnecessary.

In just a few minutes, the concoction transformed into a greyish paste, signalling not only the change in texture but also my success as the System chimed in with a new [Skill] unlock.

[System]: *[Medicine] Skill unlocked.*

[System]: *100xp gained for [Medicine] Skill.*

"Yeeees!" I couldn't contain my excitement, a wave of dopamine flooding my system as I removed the pot from the stove. The next step was to dry out the paste to create a powder, but knowing I was over halfway through the recipe was a massive relief.

The fact that I'd unlocked [Medicine] was a good sign I remembered the recipe correctly as well. After all, mixing random chemicals to no beneficial end wouldn't exactly qualify as anything related to [Medicine], right?

Strangely enough, [Chemistry] was also a legit Skill in Neon Dragons, but it was out of reach for me for the time being. From what I could recall, unlocking it demanded a Tech and Intellect of at least 4, whereas [Medicine] didn't really have such prerequisites.

I figured this discrepancy was probably for gameplay balance.

The devs had likely wanted to make sure that the players could whip up some basic meds without much hassle, but keeping the more explosive or illicit chemical experiments behind a bit more of a barrier.

Despite their similarities, this separation meant I could dabble in [Medicine] right off the bat, while [Chemistry] would have to wait.

As I spread the paste onto the only oven tray I managed to find—hidden in the last place I checked; inside the oven, of course, because where else?—and set the oven to a gentle heat to avoid any chance of burning the mixture. As I did so, I pondered whether levelling up [Medicine] might incidentally boost my [Chemistry] Skills too, once I had it unlocked.

'It would make sense, as the System doesn't seem to really make a distinction between Skills that are used with any particular action. Throwing a knife does level up both [Throwing] and [Knives], after all, so I don't really see why this would be any different... But I guess that's not really relevant until I actually get to [Chemistry].'

After setting everything up for a slow dry, I made sure to clean up my makeshift lab thoroughly. The last thing I needed was to stumble through an explanation with the rest of the family about my kitchen chemistry experiments.

Sure, I could spin some tale about practising recipes from the food stall, but honestly, I'd rather keep this adventure entirely under wraps if possible.

Leaning back into the chair, I picked up where I left off, pondering if the brief disruption with the [Medicine] Skill's unlock might've jogged my brain into a new line of thinking.

'Okay, so if I were the System, what Skills would I sneak in there?' I mused.

Typically, RPGs didn't bother with Skills like [Singing] or [Dancing] beyond a quest gimmick or two. But Neon Dragons was a different beast, treating them as full-blown Skills complete with their own Perk trees and uses.

That meant the obvious low-hanging fruit were off the table for me to guess at.

Then it hit me, *'What about musical instruments?'*

If vocal and dance skills were in play, but nothing for making music, that gap seemed like a ripe opportunity. *'I'll need to snag an affordable instrument to give it a whirl,'* I noted down in the file I had started this morning, adding it to my future shopping list for when I had some disposable income.

For now, my scant funds were earmarked for essentials only, like [Medicine] and [Tailoring]. A potential music production [Skill] sounded cool, but it wasn't something I absolutely needed right away.

Continuing to mull over the potential Skills I hadn't explored yet, I got to thinking about the limitations within the System itself.

'There's no dedicated [Running] Skill, it's all bundled under [Athletics], so anything branching from that's probably off the table,' I pondered, wanting to at least find a handful of Skills to work towards, so as to not waste this entire day worth of research. *'[Acrobatics] falls into the same bucket, and I've already snagged [Climbing], which is the only logical offshoot I can think of. It'd be a stretch to say [Climbing] falls directly under either, in any sane discussion.'*

After letting my thoughts wander for a good half hour, a few viable Skills popped up in my mind. I considered exploring [Fixing], [Gardening] / [Farming], maybe some type of [Husbandry] or [Pet Care], and potentially, for practical reasons, [Laws] or [Corporate Rights] of some kind.

Given the existence of Skills like [Slicing] and [Ripping], and not to forget [Ganger] from the game, [Fixing] seemed like a natural Skill to exist. However, it felt out of reach unless I somehow got involved in a crew job, which wasn't on the horizon anytime soon. Still, I made a mental note of it on my figurative 'to-explore' list, hoping to maybe tackle it in the future.

The idea of [Gardening] or [Farming] immediately clicked with me, just as [Slicing] had before.

In the game, these concepts weren't touched upon since the developers hadn't integrated any agriculture mechanics. Yet, in a world that was fully realised and had to exist on its own two feet, agriculture must play *some* role, suggesting the System would accommodate such activities with a [Skill], given I could find actual seeds and a suitable environment for growth.

And while my recent market excursions hadn't unveiled any gardening or farming outlets, it wasn't too surprising either.

'Considering the cramped living conditions, it's understandable,' I reflected, considering the logistics of urban agriculture. *'There's hardly room for personal belongings, let alone farming. Plus, without access to sunlight, I'd likely need a UV lamp to simulate the necessary conditions for plant growth.'* With this in mind, I added a note to my shopping list: Seeds, soil, plant pots, and potentially a UV lamp, as essentials for exploring this avenue further.

Next on my list was diving into the world of [Pet Care] or some form of [Husbandry].

Unlike my previous world, where pets were a common sight in many households, the universe of Neon Dragons portrayed a starkly different reality. The demanding balance—or complete and utter lack thereof—between work and life in this cyberpunk setting left little

room for the luxury of pet ownership, especially for those requiring constant care and attention.

Yet, the concept wasn't entirely alien here either.

The richer citizens of Neo Avalis, in particular, were known to maintain rather exotic collections of animals, showcasing their wealth, status and influence. Although the idea of managing an extensive menagerie was far beyond my means and current ambitions, the prospect of caring for a stray cat, dog, or any other animal once I ventured beyond Delta was definitely something I could imagine.

'I wonder what perks would come with such a Skill... A beastmaster-like progression could come in handy, assuming I find the right companion,' I pondered, allowing myself a small grin at the thought. While the notion of companion-based builds hadn't ever been my go-to strategy, the recent mission's debacle had me open to any advantage I could secure to keep myself safe(r) in this unpredictable world.

To prepare for any potential encounters, I made an additional note to pick up some simple, throwable food for my first outing beyond the confines of the megabuilding, just in case I stumbled upon any stray animals lurking in the vast urban sprawl.

Last on my current list was some kind of [Law] Skill.

In Neon Dragons, there had been NPC lawyers, both civil and corporate-based, but it was not actually a branch of gameplay that the player character themselves could follow.

The developers had very much made the whole legal aspect a side-game in itself, where you'd have to continuously keep good relations with different lawyers through a wide variety of means, in order to get access to legal documents or have protection in case something more severe was brought up.

While there were no real enforceable laws in Neo Avalis in specific, as the police was not equipped to deal with such a vast populace at all, there were still instances where a legal battle was the most cost and time efficient way to handle an incident, for both individuals as well as corporations.

It usually only happened when both parties had some form of massive collateral, so simply "getting rid" of one party was not an option, but it also sometimes ended up happening over minor disagreements, if the act of setting a legal precedent was considered worth the effort.

The world's judicial system closely mirrored what I was familiar with from my previous life, predominantly overseen by a sole judge unless the case escalated beyond what one individual could confidently adjudicate.

Then, it would shift to an anonymous panel to distribute the weight of responsibility—and potential weight of consequences.

Judges typically hailed from the upper crust of society, as the average Joe couldn't realistically juggle the demands of acquiring the requisite qualifications with the ludicrous day-to-day demands of actually staying alive.

While there were a handful of outliers, it was a rare sight to see someone from a modest background in such a position of power. This skewed representation meant navigating the legal waters was particularly treacherous for those not of the same social strata.

Attempting to seek justice against someone of higher standing without concrete proof was a seriously risky endeavour. More often than not, without undeniable evidence, your claims could easily be dismissed, sometimes backfiring to the point of finding yourself behind bars instead.

Considering all that, [Law], [Corporate Rights], or anything related felt like a solid candidate for a [Skill] the System might have up its sleeve. Assuming my hunch about the System was on the mark, it seemed logical there'd be a [Skill] for most such broad job categories.

But unlocking it and getting good at it promised to be as tricky as mastering [Gardening].

'Wonder if there's a shard-library or someplace I can snag information shards from...?' The thought wasn't new, but with my ever-expanding wishlist of Skills and world knowledge, the urgency to hunt one down was becoming increasingly undeniable.

Shards with this sort of intel were probably as pricey as books in mediaeval times, meaning I might only manage to snag a couple after weeks of grinding at Mr. Shori's. Yet, they'd be absolutely crucial and downright irreplaceable for unlocking different Skills for me and boosting my progress in others significantly.

'Guess I'll hit up Mr. Shori, see if he's got intel on any such spots,' I decided, dropping another reminder in my notes, fingers crossed I wouldn't space out on it, the next time I went down to the 16th floor.

Glancing back over my scribbles from today, I found myself in a pretty good mood about it all.

Sure, the haul of new Skills wasn't exactly breaking any records, but the ones I did bag were either right there on the money in terms of utility or seemed like they'd level up easy enough to give me a quick peek at the Perks they'd unlock.

Plus, I'd cracked some of the code on how the System's XP drops worked, which meant I could fine-tune my daily grind to get the max bang for my buck. On top of that, I had my hands on a tidy list of non-game [Skills] to chase after, on top of the hefty catalogue of game [Skills] I was already eyeing but hadn't quite gotten my hands on yet, for one reason or another.

All in all, not too shabby for a day's work.

Glancing at the clock, I realised I still had a solid five hours before my session at the Arkion Dojo. Only one viable road lay ahead: More [Skill] grinding.

I decided to set up another pot for some [Medicine] crafting, this time filling it with more than three times as much water. I was going to increase the amount of medicine I was going to craft with this batch, both because I had semi-confirmed that my initial recipe had succeeded and also because I wanted to see how the System would react to a three-times'ing of

crafting—namely, if it would give me 3x the amount of experience, more than that or potentially even less.

Simultaneously, I also dragged my [Tailoring] kit back from its exile in my room.

Felt a bit like Runecrafting or downing veggies—knew it was good for me, even if I wasn't exactly thrilled about it. *'Might as well knock out as much as I can today, rather than scramble for time later,'* I figured.

So, with my makeshift lab ready, tailoring gear at the ready, and a song on my lips, I dove into the triple-threat grind. *'Let's see if juggling three Skills at the same time amps up the XP gains too,'* I mused, cracking a grin, all the while hoping my multitasking wouldn't end in disaster. *'Surely, the System's gotta throw some extra points my way for managing all three at once, right? That's a lot tougher than doing only one thing at a time!'*

Like that, I decided to spend my next few hours until my scheduled appointment at the Arkion Dojo, where I'd finally get some, literal, hands-on experience with [Martial Arts]...