So a while ago I was DMing for my friends and we were approaching the end of our 2-year long campaign – after a rough week at work I realized that we were playing in about half an hour and I had done zero prep for that session. I knew it was going to be a heavy combat session and I had finished scripting this really basic, sort of abstract generator to fuel my own improv-heavy DMing style. So I used it. And now I’m here to share with you all about how it changed the way I run my D&D games.

Hi! My name is Atty, and I’m an associate game designer at Improbable where I’m working on Redacted and doing cool Redacted things, also a procgen bard/druid. I’ve also been DMing games for 3 years and I love designing within 5e’s rules structure… And this is what it looks like when I start making DM tools to empower myself as a DM, this is a Boss Creature statblock for a level 6 party: (pause)

Now you might be thinking – Atty, what the heck is this? Understandable, allow me to break the illusion of how this amazing tool works and then show you how genius \*cough\* basic the code actually is.

Now immediately you might notice the level of abstraction I’ve chosen if you’re at all familiar with the 5e system of D&D. The TTRPG system offers basic rules for “what can a player do on their turn, what can a monster do on its turn” within the various books. Generally, on a turn players can do an action, bonus action, move, interact with an object – all in the span of 6 seconds of in-game time, that’s 1 round of combat for the players. 5e is a very homebrewable system, and that’s because the rules are just stiff enough that they can be flexed in different ways to create cool custom content. With the rules in place the next thing I needed was a framework or philosophy of design or gameplay that I wanted to steep my generator in.

So the code itself uses Matt Colville’s philosophy of action oriented monsters, which is a video every DM should check out, as a framework for generation, the design truth that player character design is asymmetrical to monster design, a truth that I think DMs should lean heavily into – I’ve been using this combat philosophy for 2 years now and it has worked very well for me so I decided to model the generator around it. The only real difference is that Colville recommends getting into a monster’s headspace, figuring out the themes and such before designing its abilities and my generator focuses on getting the numbers and game-y stuff out of the way first and then *using* those generated elements to create a story for the monster.

Ok so tiny code tour time – All I’m really doing is pulling from a bunch of enums and using pre-set difficulty probabilities to dictate stats, # of actions and the kind of dice they use, all of that based on two quick user inputs – difficulty of encounter from 1 to 3 and average party level rounded up. I wrote this generator over the course of like 2 Sundays and tweaked it after playtests here and there. For example, here’s how I generate the stats for the creature – instead of using scores like the PCs or the MM does, I just generate the modifiers using min-max ranges based on the difficulty input. Like 0 complex math, just small brain python and some trial and error.

Anyway, that’s a snapshot of the backend of this process, as you can see it’s abstract and basic but it works for me, and that’s the point – how can I as a DM empower myself at the table to provide fun experiences. For me this looked like taking some ideas of random generation from games like wildermyth, betrayal, spore and then finding a way to spend less time on the semantics of designing combat, and more time designing the narrative of the session. Don’t get me wrong I don’t use this generator for sessions where the party is facing a really important story relevant enemy, I handcraft those encounters. It’s the fluff in between those really important battles where I can choose to prep for a session for 20 minutes instead of for an hour and spend those 40 minutes having tea with my partner after work instead.

With that I want to share lessons that I learned through building this generator and some other reasons why I use this generator for most of my sessions:

1. Make your tools fit your style
   1. I designed this tool knowing exactly what I wanted out of a tool like this – something lightweight that gives me flexibility and offers room for interpretation. I needed something that would give me a baseline to work off that I could shape and mold based on my party’s composition and state.
   2. I think that every DM could use tools like this that automate away some of the more tedious work of being a DM
   3. The important to thing to know is what parts do you want to focus *more* of your time on improving?
2. Every DM needs someone to Yes-And them during prep
   1. As DMs we play NPCs, we bounce off the other players during roleplay, use their words and make them our own and then pass them back
   2. But prepping as a DM can be quite lonely – you are the puppetmaster of the world, the players don’t see what’s behind the screen and I’ve learned while working on this tool and the design of it that having this tool give me a combat sheet that’s basically a suggestion is the tool empowering my improv by being a yes-and partner of sorts
   3. Tool: How about this dream-eater type creature tries to summon a bunch of minions as a desperation move  
      Me: Yes! And what if in the context of this fight these minions are shadowy dream-like entities of the people the players have a strong attachment to?
   4. Remember that stat block we generated at the beginning? This is what it led to:
3. Learning to embrace the fun of randomness in TTRPGs
   1. I used to be a DM at some point who needed every possible outcome of a session to be written and known, I needed to know the exact stat blocks
   2. Back then the guarantees felt safe because I was new to DMing – I wanted to make sure that I wasn’t the blocker for my player’s fun and so I did my best to make sure everything went smoothly
   3. Over time I’ve learned to just let go, focus on the feeling of an awesome narrative and learning to let my players do the heavy lifting. This all sort of led to me embracing the chaos in an inherently swingy game, leaning into the improv instead of away from it, taking the game’s rules and structure as suggestions and less as the way the game should be played. I’ve been able to have more fun as a result and feel less anxious about my own DMing
   4. With this generator, the one thing that’s always fun for me as a DM is if the players say, “oh man Atty’s gonna totally crush our hopes because we did X last session” and I can say “tbh even I don’t know what the combat is gonna look like until 10 mins before session so your guess is as good as mine” and then proceed to watch the fear in their eyes manifest and proceed to revel in it.
4. What else can we automate/generate in our TTRPGs?
   1. In the end all of this was really meant to sow the seeds of questions such as “what if I just generate a use-throw NPC instead of improv-ing?”, “what if I procedurally generated hurdles for a skill challenge”, “what if we can simulate our entire world and then come the session of knowledge about what transpired in the world while the party was travelling?”
   2. The possibilities are really endless and I think ultimately we shouldn’t be shying away from using procgen principles in our TTRPGs if they are allowing us DMs to spend less time being anxious and giving us more time to have fun

So anyway, I coded this generator over the course of 2 Sundays, it’s jank and I’m gonna iterate on it as I play with it – I’m excited to see what automated DM tools you all might come up with. Feel free to share it with me on twitter @Attydude or DM me if you have any questions. The code is on GitHub if you feel like you want to toy around with it, remember to change the magic numbers to work for your party. Feel free to connect with me on linkedin or and other social media platforms you use. If you’re interested in seeing this generator in action, I’m down to run a 5e one-shot in the social break coming up – just a short combat. I have pre-made character sheets; anyone is welcome I’m looking for 4 players, if you’re interested, please DM me right after the talk!. Have a great Roguelike Celebration! Any questions?