



ENCOUNTER PLANNER STORY

GOALS HELP GAMIFY COMBAT SO PLAYERS CAN QUANTIFY SUCCESS. CHOOSE 1 OR MORE!



ASSASSINATE

QUIETLY TAKE OUT A SINGLE TARGET



BBEG

DEFEAT THE BIG BAD EVIL GUY/GAL/THING



GAUNTLET

PASS THROUGH HOSTILE TERRITORY ALIVE



INFILTRATE

SNEAK IN WITHOUT RAISING A GENERAL ALARM



PROTECT

ENSURE THE SAFETY OF AN OBJECT OR NPC



RETRIEVE

OBTAIN AN OBJECT OR NPC OR INFORMATION



THWART

STOP A RITUAL, HEIST, AMBUSH OR EVIL PLOT



?

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Most encounters are not *designed* to be deadly. That's why you set one or more goals for the players to accomplish. Give them a reason to care! Set the stakes for failure, and make it clear that the consequences will be unpleasant. *If we fail to kill the chief hobgoblin and steal the Horn of Thunderous Victory a goblin war party will attack the town at daybreak, and all of your friends and family will be slaughtered!*

DRAMATIC QUESTION

Consider a single yes-or-no question that generates gravitas & urgency in your encounter? *Can the heroes stop the lich before she completes her ritual & absorbs the souls of the helpless villagers?*

SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Conflict pits two opposing forces against each other. Not just the monsters vs. the players! *Staking the vampire vs. the sun rising! Fighting the enemy vs. falling into the chasm! Defending from attacks vs. not hurting the charmed villagers!*

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BUT, WHY? WHY IS THE CLOAKER SO HUNGRY? KOBOLDS ARE ENCROACHING ON ITS HUNTING GROUNDS! NOW ITS A 3-WAY ENCOUNTER! CONSIDER WHY TO ADD DIMENSION.

SETUP & HOOK HOW DO THE PLAYERS LAND IN THIS ENCOUNTER? WHAT STORYLINE LED THEM HERE? AND HOW DID THEY FIND IT?

HIDDEN CLUES & SECRETS THIS IS GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO ADVANCE THE STORY. WHAT CAN THE CHARACTER LEARN HERE BY INTERROGATING A CAPTIVE, SEARCHING THE AREA, DISSECTING A DEAD CREATURE, INVESTIGATING HOW A TRAP WAS MADE...?

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ENCOUNTER PLANNER SETTING

ENVIRONMENT SETS THE STAGE! CONSISTENCY LENDS BELIEVABLY WHILE PARADOX KEEPS PLAYERS GUESSING. PRO TIP: COMBINE 2 BELOW.

	ARCTIC	MOUNTAINS OF ICE. TUNDRA. ICY WATERS...
	AQUATIC	SEAFARING. SHIPWRECKS. UNDERWATER LAIRS...
	COASTAL	BEACHES. BLUFFS. ISLANDS. LAKES. RIVERS...
	DESERT	ENDLESS SANDS. DRY RAVINES. RED ROCKS...
	FOREST	CONFERS. EVERGREENS. UNKNOWN GROWTHS...
	GRASSLANDS	FARMLANDS. HILLS. PLAINS. SAVANNAHS...
	HABITATIONS	CITIES. HAMLETS. TOWNS & VILLAGES
	INTERPLANAR	OVERLAP THE FEYWILD. THE SHADOWFELL...
	JUNGLE	MANGROVES. PALMS. SWAMPS. VINES...
	MOUNTAIN	ANCIENT TRAILS. HIDDEN CAVES. ROCKY CRAGS...
	RUINS	KEEPs. TEMPLES. CITIES. UNKNOWN CIVILIZATIONS...
	SKY & SPACE	AERIAL COMBAT. FLOATING CITIES. SPELLJAMMING...
	UNDERGROUND	CAVERNS. MINES. UNDERDARK CIVILIZATIONS...

LORE EPIC LOCATIONS HAVE HISTORY. WAS THE DESERT ONCE AN OCEAN? WHAT CIVILIZATION ONCE INHABITED THESE RUINS? WHY DO LOCALS AVOID THESE WOODS?

EPIC LOCATION

EPIC LOCATIONS ARE KNOWN BY ENIGMATIC NAMES...THE VALLEY OF UNBURDENED SOULS

DETAILS THE SENSES CONVEY THE FEELING OF BEING THERE. WHAT DO THEY SEE, HEAR, SMELL & TASTE? WHAT MEMORIES OR FEELINGS ARE EVOKED?

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OBSTACLES

ADD DIMENSION TO YOUR ENCOUNTERS WITHOUT PILING ON MORE MONSTERS. PRO TIP: MORE THAN 3 IS UNMANAGEABLE

TYPE	NAME			XP
DC AVOID	DESCRIPTION		SUCCESSFUL SAVE	
DC DISARM			FAILED SAVE	
DC REPAIR	ARMOR CLASS	HIT POINTS	SAVING THROW	

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DC AVOID	DESCRIPTION		SUCCESSFUL SAVE	
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TYPE	NAME			XP
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DC DISARM			FAILED SAVE	
DC REPAIR	ARMOR CLASS	HIT POINTS	SAVING THROW	



HAZARDOUS BRAINSTORM

Air Quality: Contaminated, Poisonous, Thin...

Bystanders: Innocent Creatures

Caustic: Acid, Oozes, Rust Inducing...

Climate: Cold, Heat, Precipitation, Wind...

Cover: Constructed & Natural

Darkness: Cave, Fog, Magical, Nightfall...

Desecrated: Battles, Graves, Necromancy...

Fire: Buildings, Forest, Hearth, Pits, Pyres...

Illusions: Magical, Mirages, Optical...

Magic/Anti-Magic: Devices, Fields, Traps...

Noise: Damage, Deafness, Distraction...

Poisonous: Gases, Locks, Plants, Pools...

Portals: Doors, Gates, Locks, Planar...

Psychic: Charm, Fear, Madness, Sleep...

Terrain: Difficult, Hazardous... Disasters!

Time: Competitions, Countdowns, Timers...

Traps: Visible/Known vs. Unseen/Unknown

Vertical: Climbing, Falling, Flying...

Volcanic: Eruptions, Fire, Lava, Smoke...

Water: Drowning, Floods, Ice, Pools, Rivers...

Webs: Could Be A Bridge, Or A Ladder...

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ENCOUNTER PLANNER MONSTERS

THREAT LEVEL YOU CAN NEVER TRULY PREDICT, BUT SET YOUR EXPECTATION.



TRIVIAL

A STORY-BUILDING OBSTACLE



LOW

SOFTEN 'EM UP FOR A FUTURE FIGHT



MODERATE

HIGH TENSION, BUT ACHIEVABLE



SEVERE

OH, YOU WANT A CHALLENGE?



DEADLY

RUNNING AWAY MIGHT BE SMART

THREAT ASSESSMENT MOST RPG SYSTEMS USE A VALUE (XP, CR, ETC.) TO GRADE MONSTERS AND PROVIDE WAY TO CALCULATE A BUDGET BASED ON THE LEVEL/NUMBER OF CHARACTERS.

ENCOUNTER BUDGET



SUM TOTAL OF MONSTERS

CREATURE CHOICE

CREATURES WITHOUT MOTIVATION ARE JUST OBSTACLES. CONSIDER THEIR GOALS. ALSO CONSIDER HOW THEY RELATE. PRO TIP: DEFY EXPECTATIONS TO KEEP PLAYERS GUESSING!

CREATURE(S)

PRIMARY THREAT

XP

MOTIVATION & GOALS

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER THREATS

MOTIVATIONS

Abberations: Alien entities have inexplicable motivations. Focus on the terror they cause.

Animals, Beasts & Monstrosities: Instinctually want to eat & protect hunting grounds. Social species protect the pack. Some types can be trained by intelligent creatures to guard assets.

Constructs: Exclusively follow their creator's programming. They may act erratically in paradoxical situations or from critical damage.

Dragons: Tyrannical & greedy by nature. Driven to conquest, but generally apathetic as rulers. Pathological compulsion to hoard treasure.

Fey: Mischievous, but rarely evil. Driven to dramatic extremes by emotions or aesthetics. Consider child-like or dream-state goals.

Giant Folk: Concerned largely with Giant politics, varying in sophistication by type. Interested in beasts & humanoids for food, slaves & resources.

Humanoids: Driven to dominate territory & control resources. Sophistication depends on average intelligence. May use ideology or religion to quell and control populations.

Interplanar: Celestials seek to purify the cosmic order. Will influence or protect creatures for those interests. Fiends do just the opposite: they seek to corrupt. Elementals are unpredictable, like a storm, motivated by wavelengths outside of our perception. Controlling elementals is a tenuous undertaking of great hubris.

Plants, Oozes & Fungi: Exist to survive, propagate & divide. Higher intelligence may improve tactics, but not motives. Blights also have a compulsive streak, see Undead below.

Undead: Relentlessly act from compulsion. Lower beings carry out the will of their creator, even at the expense of survival. Ghosts and spirits have unfinished business. Higher beings are driven by malice, "hunger" or megalomania.

"AND IF YOU GAZE LONG ENOUGH INTO AN ABYSS,
THE ABYSS WILL GAZE BACK INTO YOU."

-FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

CREATURE(S)

SECONDARY THREAT

XP

MOTIVATION & GOALS

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER THREATS

CREATURE(S)

LESSER THREATS

XP

MOTIVATIONS, RELATIONSHIPS

CREATURE(S)

XP

MOTIVATIONS, RELATIONSHIPS

IS IT TOO DEADLY?

According to Mike Shea (The Lazy DM), an D&D encounter may be deadly if the *sum total of monster challenge ratings* is greater than one quarter of the sum total of character levels, or half the sum total of character levels if the characters are above 4th.

Pathfinder players can generate a similar result using *Table 10-2: Creature XP and Role* from the Pathfinder 2e Core Rulebook.

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INSPIRATION

Betrayal: Everyone loves a good double-cross! Vendettas, racial politics, or just good old fashioned greed could cause your enemies to begin fighting with each other instead!

Captured: In lieu of a TPK, have the monsters knock your players out and take them hostage. Then you can run a super fun jail-break side quest back at the lair.

Natural Disaster: A new hazard is created by an earthquake, volcanic eruption, tornado, tidal wave, interplanar cataclysm... think big!

Parley: Consider motivations. A threat may entrench and attempt to negotiate for retreat, surrender, the object of their desire, or cold, hard cash. Focus on roleplaying.

Reinforcements: Healthy ranks arrive just in time to supplement a flagging threat. Maybe it's a new threat, or just more of the same.

Revelation: Your enemy's hidden weakness is revealed! You find a hidden trail that allows you to flank from behind! Remember, information is power. Drop some clues.

Time: The sun sets or rises. A threat awakens for nocturnal feeding. The players failed to act in time before something bad happens...

Unexpected Foe: Hold back a threat for the right moment. Attack the players to slow things down, attack the enemy to speed things up. Maybe they erupt from the ground?

Weather: Heavy rains can turn solid ground into a muddy mess... *difficult terrain!* The tides of war can swing in an instant with fog, rain, wind, dust storms, lightning, snow, etc.

Withdraw: A flagging threat will usually seek to prioritize survival over victory, unless it's acting under compulsion or some kind of forced servitude. Don't knock simple retreat.

EXTEND WAIT, IT'S GOING TOO FAST! PLEASE
UNEXPECTED EVENTS. MINE THEM.

EXTEND WAIT, IT'S GOING TOO FAST! PLAN AHEAD BY CONSIDERING 1 OR 2 UNEXPECTED EVENTS. MINE THE INSPIRATION TABLE & THINK BIG.

FUDGING NUMBERS

Every DM fudges numbers. While I recommend the strategies on this page to end or extend encounters, don't be afraid to increase/decrease hit points within the monster's Hit Dice range. You can also use minimum, average or maximum damage to tap the breaks or punch the gas.

BAILOUT

AN ENDLESS SLOG-FEST KILLS PLAYER ENGAGEMENT. OF COURSE YOU COULD FUDGE SOME ROLLS. BUT WHAT MIGHT ADD DIMENSION?

RANDOM ROLLS

EVERYONE LOVES TO ROLL MATH ROCKS! GENERATE SOME RANDOM ROLLS FOR: DIFFICULTY CLASSES, CREATURE IDENTIFICATION, ENEMY MORALE, TREASURE, UNEXPECTED EVENTS, ETC.



ENCOUNTER PLANNER TACTICS

PRIMARY

SECONDARY

LESSER

STR OFF: MELEE ATTACKS DEF: UNGRAPPLE

- 1-8 **Weakling:** Avoids melee, more likely to flee. Very susceptible to being grappled & captured.
- 9-13 **Average:** Will rely on other abilities first, knows that stronger creatures pose a threat up close.
- 14+ **Brute:** Not afraid to get up close and personal. Capable of grappling & shoving average foes.

DEX OFF: RANGED ATTACKS DEF: ARMOR CLASS, SAVING THROWS, UNGRAPPLE

- 1-8 **Easy Target:** Easy to hit, terrible aim & not very stealthy. Will rely on brute strength or magic.
- 9-13 **Average:** Will rely on other abilities first, decent aim and agility. Tentative about using surprise.
- 14+ **Lightfoot:** Harder to hit, prefers ranged attacks. When up close, will prefer to hide & ambush.

CON OFF: NA DEF: HIT POINTS, SAVING THROWS

- 1-8 **Lightweight:** Probably has an innate sense that it's fragile. Will prioritize defense & cover.
- 9-13 **Average:** Healthy fear of taking damage, but not a coward. Unlikely to take unnecessary risks.
- 14+ **Roughneck:** Not afraid to take some damage, resists endurance attacks quite well. (ex: Poison)

INT OFF: COMBAT STRATEGY, SPELLCASTING DEF: SAVING THROWS

- 1-7 **Instinctual:** Uses natural advantages effectively, but can't adjust its tactics on the fly.
- 8-11 **Adaptable:** Applies limited strategy, but can assess and adjust to threats on the fly.
- 12-13 **Coordinated:** Plans & coordinates with others. Has several strategies, adjusts to adapt.
- 14-18 **Proficient:** Able to assess enemy weaknesses and improvise strategies on the fly.
- 19+ **Superhuman:** Able to detect hidden weaknesses. Can mimic or meet enemy tactics.

WIS OFF: TARGETING, SPELLCASTING DEF: SURVIVAL INSTINCT, SAVING THROWS

- 1-7 **Ignorant:** Chooses targets by proximity. May fail to flee in time: underdeveloped survival instinct.
- 8-11 **Blunt:** Can make rudimentary target & threat assessments. Understands when to retreat.
- 12-13 **Aware:** Chooses targets strategically. Likely to attempt to parlay rather than simply withdraw.
- 14-18 **Wise:** Avoids fights where victory is in question. Likely to bluff, bargain or bully before retreating.
- 19+ **Superhuman:** Rarely fights. Always has several escape plans. Never caught flat-footed.

CHA OFF: SPELLCASTING DEF: PARLAY, SAVING THROWS

- 1-7 **Crude:** Poor social skills. Subject to tantrums and emotional outbursts. Easily fooled & conned.
- 8-11 **Affable:** Reasonable self-control and will power. Can detect obvious lies & deception.
- 12-13 **Disarming:** Quick witted and streetwise. Fast friends at the tavern, and tough to deceive.
- 14-18 **Shrewd:** Can sell ice to an eskimo. Knows how to lie effectively. Strong willed & persuasive.
- 19+ **Superhuman:** Charming almost to magical proportions. An iron will with a silver tongue.

MONSTER

COMBAT TACTICS

Before you dig into making a stat block, consider this monster's fighting style from a more wholistic perspective. Remember the story you're telling about this monster, and use these tools to build a believable tactical profile.

ABILITY CONTOUR PLOT THIS MONSTER'S ABILITY SCORES ON THE GRAPH BELOW. IDENTIFY PRIMARY OFFENSE & DEFENSE ABILITIES ON THE TABLES TO THE LEFT.

19+
14-18
12-13
8-11
1-7

STR DEX CON INT WIS CHA

FIGHTING STYLE USING THE ABILITY CONTOUR & THE REFERENCE ON THE LEFT SUMMARIZE THIS CREATURES FIGHTING STYLE IN A FEW, QUICK SENTENCES.

ICONIC POWERS

Compelling monsters have an iconic ability that defines them, one or more abilities that enhance or augment it, and an armed or unarmed melee attack. This is a brainstorm, not a stat block. Consider the unexpected & play against expectations.

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HIDDEN ASSETS

Unique creatures have hidden talents & traits. Given the opportunity, they will shape the environment and the situation to leverage these strengths. Consider special senses, proficiencies, resistances, immunities and defensive magical abilities.

MORALE & FLAWS

Assess this creature's instincts, training & motivation. Consider the strength of its survival instinct. What does it fear? Does it have any sensitivities or an Achilles heel? Under what conditions will it withdraw, parlay or surrender?



HP Left	Perceived Injuries
90%	Light
70%	Moderate
40%	Severe
20%	Critical

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PARSING ABILITIES MONSTERS PLAY TO THEIR STRENGTHS & AVOID THEIR WEAKNESSES:

- STR CON** Rushes in to melee, not afraid to take damage.
- STR DEX** Ambush predator, counts on a fast win.
- DEX CON** Hard to hit with lots of endurance. Willing to fight a battle of attrition.

For a deeper understanding of these concepts, pick up *The Monsters Know What They're Doing* by Keith Ammann.



THEATER OF WAR USE THIS SPACE TO PLAN YOUR MANUEVERS. SIMPLE LINES & SYMBOLS WILL SUFFICE. TRY COLORED PENCILS!

MANUEVERS

DEIVE A PLAYBOOK FOR EACH THREAT OVER THE FIRST THREE ROUNDS. USE THE SPACE ABOVE TO VISUALIZE. THEN, CONSIDER HOW EACH THREAT REACTS TO BELIEVING THEY ARE WINNING & LOSING.

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WINNING**LOSING**

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