
5e
HARDMODE



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5e HARDMODE

Does your 5e game suffer from cakewalk syndrome? Players routinely steamrolling what should be deadly encounters? Downed adventurers dancing the whack-a-mole jig? Attacking dying PCs to claw back a modicum of danger?

You're not alone. Standard 5e is notoriously safe and survivable. But don't fire up the furnace just yet. *Hardmode* is here to inject more peril into your campaign. With a few special tweaks and additions, your next session will be buzzing with white knuckle excitement.

What follows are 9 optional rules designed to modify certain aspects of the game, including: higher lethality, party retreat, removing balanced encounters, removing the need for many encounters per day, persistent injuries, incapacitation at zero hp, Boss monster templates, discouraging nova-rest-repeat, chase tables, and more.

So gather thy allies 'bout the gaming table. Make ready the dice, the beverages, and the character records! And prepare for adventure the likes of which ye've not experienced before. Will PCs die in droves? Will carefully crafted plots go to waste? Will players exult in hard won victories? Undoubtedly, assuredly, and emphatically. Welcome to *5e Hardmode*.

RULE 1: COMBAT DICE

All combat dice are rolled in the open. The reason for this is to dispel any possibility that the GM might be fudging rolls in favour of the players. In *Hardmode*, the chips fall where they may. If the GM wants to influence an outcome, there are other (better) ways to do it.

RULE 2: MAGIC

Removed Spells

The following spells are removed from PC class lists (whether they are also removed from the world at large is a matter for the GM). The intent is to make things more difficult with respect to survival, wilderness travel, healing and mystery investigation. Spells outside the core player's book are at the GM's discretion.

- Gate
- Counterspell
- Create Food and Water
- Create or Destroy Water
- Darkvision (only if using Rule 6, see later)
- Demiplane



- Detect Thoughts
- Find Traps
- Goodberry
- Heroes' Feast
- Tiny Hut
- Magnificent Mansion
- Purify Food and Drink
- Raise Dead
- Regenerate
- Reincarnate
- Resurrection
- Revivify
- Spare the Dying
- Teleport
- Teleportation Circle
- True Resurrection
- Zone of Truth

New Spells

The following two spells are added to bard, cleric, druid, paladin and ranger spell lists. Their purpose is to help manage persistent injuries (see *Injuries & Setbacks*) and more common exhaustion (see *Party Retreat*).

Cure Minor Injury

2nd-level evocation

Casting Time: 1 action

Range: Touch

Components: V, S

Duration: Instantaneous

Over the course of 1d6 hours, this spell mends one temporary injury, restores 1d4 lost attribute points, or removes one level of exhaustion.

Regenerate

5th-level transmutation

Casting Time: 1 action

Range: Touch

Components: V, S

Duration: Instantaneous

This spell replaces the 7th level version. The target regrows one lost eye, ear, limb or other physical appendage over 1d6 days. The material component is 500 gp worth of troll blood.

RULE 3: DEATH SAVES

When a PC is reduced to zero hit points, the adventurer is unconscious and out of the fight. At the end of the battle, the PC makes a single death save. If the PC receives healing or treatment of some kind (binding wounds, etc), they gain advantage on the save.

If the death save is failed, the PC dies. If successful, the adventurer survives but rolls on the *Injuries & Setbacks* table (see p.10). A natural 20 death save negates the injury roll. Without further healing, the PC awakens in 1d3 minutes with 1 hp.



The purpose of this rule is to make death and persistent injuries more common, increasing lethality and combat risks. Note that, assuming the death save is made at advantage, there is approx a 20% chance of failing (which is actually much lower than the standard fail three death saves rule, for which there is approx 40% chance of dying). The critical difference with this variant however is

that the death save cannot be avoided; healing dramatically increases the chance of survival, but the roll must still be made.

RULE 4: HEALING AT ZERO HIT POINTS

All healing at zero hit points, magical or otherwise, requires 1d3 minutes to take effect (or longer, GM discretion). This reflects the extra time required for the spell or other treatment to sufficiently mitigate the wound rendering the PC unconscious.

The purpose of this rule is to eliminate “whack-a-mole” phenomena and force meaningful decisions about whether to heal (or flee) *before* dropping to zero health. Once a character drops to zero, there is no way to reinstate them as active combatants in the current battle.

RULE 5: RESTS

Short Rests

Short rests permit Hit Dice healing as usual, but do not restore class abilities. Class abilities that are normally restored on a short rest are restored via long rests instead, but may be used twice as often.

For example, a 2nd level Fighter may use Action Surge twice per long rest, and a 2nd level Warlock may cast four 1st level spells per long rest.

Long Rests

Expend class abilities are not restored automatically. Instead, each player rolls 2d6:

2d6	ABILITIES RESTORED
2-5	None of the character's expended abilities are restored.
6-8	Half of the character's expended abilities are restored.
9-10	Three quarters of the character's expended abilities are restored.
11-12	All of the character's expended abilities are restored.

Expended abilities include number of spell slots used, number of rages used, number of invocations used, number of Action Surges used, and so on. Round down if required. The player decides which abilities are recovered.



The purpose of tying all class abilities to long rests, and making the recovery of used abilities uncertain, is to:

- (i) Emphasize resource attrition,
- (ii) Discourage nova-ing during long treks or city adventures, when battles tend to be infrequent (resulting in the encounters being trivialized), and
- (iii) Alleviate the need for many encounters per day.



RULE 6: DARKVISION

No PC race grants darkvision. Only monsters can see naturally in the dark. Races that normally gain darkvision do not suffer disadvantage in dim light instead. The purpose of this rule is to make monsters with darkvision scarier and the infiltration of dark places more difficult.

RULE 7: BOSS MONSTER TEMPLATE

This rule is in addition to *Legendary Creatures*. A Boss Monster is a particularly powerful example of its kind; strong enough to fight the party alone or with minimal back up. Classic Bosses include high level monsters such as dragons, vampires,

greater demons and liches; foes that threaten the greatest adventurers. For lower level foes, monsters such as owlbears, ogres, beastmen chiefs, dire wolves, and so on make excellent Bosses.

Bosses gain any or all of the following characteristics (GM's call):

- *Maximum Hit Points*
A Boss has maximum hit points.
- *Off Turn Attacks*
A Boss may make a single physical attack in between PC turns. If a Boss has no enemies within reach between PC turns, the monster may also take a move action. An *Off Turn Attack* may not be taken at the same time as a *Legendary Action*.
- *Boss Resistance*
Bosses are not susceptible to effects that stun, incapacitate or kill them until reduced to half hp. Additionally, Bosses gains a save to resist adverse effects that don't normally allow saves, for example a *Sleep* spell.
- *Rerolls*
Bosses start combat with 1d4+1 *Rerolls*. They may use a reroll at any time, rerolling a single die roll made by the Boss.
- *Cause Injuries*
Any time a Boss hits a PC with a natural attack roll of 19-20, the target rolls on the *Injuries & Setbacks* table (see p.10).
- *Custom Abilities*
Bosses often come with custom abilities (eg *Legendary actions*, *Lair actions*, etc).

RULE 8: PARTY RETREAT

At the start of a round, if the whole party wishes to flee from a battle, they must first explain to the GM how escape might be possible. If the GM agrees, a group Constitution (Athletics) check vs DC 10 is required, possibly with Str checks to carry away

unconscious allies. The GM might impose modifiers depending on all the circumstances.

If successful, the whole party suffers 1 level of exhaustion, but the adventurers manage to break away from the fight with incapacitated allies over their shoulders (or otherwise in tow, as explained by the players). Fleeing may lead to a *Chase* at the GM's option.

If unsuccessful, the GM might permit any individually successful adventurers to flee, with the other PCs remaining behind. The party, or any remaining PCs, may attempt to flee again next round if desired.

Party Retreat is the most important tool in *Hardmode*. By implementing a formal retreat mechanic (as early editions had), the GM is freed from the shackles of "balanced" encounters, and may throw whatever makes sense at the party. Monsters completely outside the usual range may be used, safe in the knowledge that if the party needs to escape, they probably will (albeit at a cost). If the players choose to fight on despite overwhelming odds, they reap what they sow.

RULE 9: CHASE TABLE

To complement the Party Retreat rule, presented below is an abstract chase system that attempts to recreate the frenetic pace of an exciting pursuit.

Setup

- The chase has two sides: the chasers and the quarry.

- The GM determines the starting gap between the two sides (alternatively 6d10+60 ft).
- The chase is broken down into 3d6 legs (rolled secretly). The timescale for each leg is flexible, from thirty seconds to multiple hours.
- If the chasers reduce the gap to zero before the end of the last leg, the quarry are caught and the chase ends. Otherwise the quarry escape. The GM might also rule that the quarry escape if they open a wide enough gap (eg: 200 ft).

Resolving the Chase

- (1) At the start of each leg, both sides choose one character to lead them. No character may lead a second leg until all allies have lead a first leg, and so on.
- (2) The two leaders make opposed Con (Athletics) checks (or other appropriate ability check, depending on the circumstances). The winning side widens or closes the gap by 1d10 ft per 10 ft movement rate of the leader (rounding up). Eg: a 25 ft movement rate = 3d10 ft.
- (3) The player controlling the leader rolls on the *Chase Event* table. There is a 50% chance the result applies to the leader and/or party, otherwise it affects the opposing side.
- (4) Repeat until the chase ends.

1d20	CHASE EVENT
1	<p>Large Crowd</p> <p>A large group of creatures impedes the progress of the characters in a non-violent manner (eg: <i>a funeral procession, wilder beast herd, dwarven mining crew, cloud of curious young air elementals</i>). One or more characters may (amongst other things) attempt to persuade or intimidate the group to assist them (GM discretion). If the crowd is not managed or bypassed, the opposing side rolls to widen or close the gap.</p>

2	<p>Dangerous Hazard The GM improvises a physical threat of some kind (eg: <i>a street riot, poisonous vines, carnivorous plant, underground slime, swarm of giant insects</i>). 1d4 characters must make a Dex save (DC 15) or suffer 2d6+level damage.</p>
3	<p>Obstruction The GM improvises a physical obstruction of some kind (eg: <i>a horse & cart, thick scrub, crumbling passage, powerful winds</i>). If the characters cannot bypass or resolve the obstruction, the opposing side rolls to widen or close the gap.</p>
4	<p>Snap Opportunity Randomly nominate 1d4 characters from both sides. Those participants may take an action to assist themselves or act against the opposing side, provided they declare their action within a 5 second count down! The GM adjudicates what kinds of actions are possible in the circumstances, but might include making ranged attacks, casting spells, attempting to lasso a quarry, dropping caltrops, etc.</p>
5	<p>Random Setback <i>Roll 1d6:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>1 - Drop something:</i> The character accidentally drops something valuable. Depending on the item, the GM might require a check to notice the loss. • <i>2 - Fatigue:</i> The character is overcome by unexpected fatigue and suffers 1 level of exhaustion. If an NPC, the character drops out of the chase. • <i>3 - Head Strike:</i> The character is struck on the head by an object. The character must make a Con save (DC 15) or be stunned and drop out of the chase. • <i>4 - Fall:</i> The character trips and falls, suffering a setback improvised by the GM (eg: falls down stairs, injured knee, damaged object, etc). • <i>5 - Hostile Third Party:</i> The character is beset upon by a hostile random encounter. The character must make a Dex save (DC 15) or drop out of the chase and deal with the random encounter. • <i>6 - Lost:</i> The character is somehow separated from any others. The character must make an Int save (DC 15) or become lost (momentarily or otherwise) and drop out of the chase.
6	<p>Third Party A single or small number of creatures impede the characters' progress in a non-violent manner (eg: <i>1d4 beggars, a drunk woodsman, 1d6 underground xornlings, 1d4 lost sprites</i>). One or more characters may (amongst other things) attempt to persuade or intimidate the creatures to assist them (GM discretion). If the creature(s) is not managed or bypassed, the opposing side rolls to widen or close the gap.</p>
7	<p>Dangerous Hazard The GM improvises a physical threat of some kind (eg: <i>falling debris from an upper storey window, hunting trap, dungeon deadfall, hostile giant bird</i>). 1d4 characters must make a Dex save (DC 15) or suffer 1d6 + level damage. There is a 50% chance that a random piece of equipment is lost, damaged or destroyed (not inc permanent magical items).</p>
8	<p>Obstruction The GM improvises a physical obstruction of some kind (eg: <i>barrels and crates, fast running stream, jammed dungeon door, smoke</i>). If the characters cannot bypass or resolve the obstruction, the opposing side rolls to widen or close the gap.</p>

9	<p>Snap Opportunity Randomly nominate 1d4 characters. Those participants may take an action to assist their side or act against the opposing side, provided they declare their action within a 5 second count down! The GM adjudicates what kinds of actions are possible in the circumstances, but might include making ranged attacks, casting spells, attempting to lasso a quarry, dropping caltrops, etc.</p>
10	<p>Cross Paths A random chaser gets lucky with a shortcut and catches up to a random quarry lagging behind. Each character may make a single melee attack against the other, or take some other action, before being separated again.</p>
11	<p>Hidey Hole The quarry locate a viable hiding place and may make a group Dex (Stealth) check opposed by the chasers' group Wis (Perception) check. The GM might impose modifiers on the checks depending on distances and other circumstances. If the quarry succeed they escape. If they fail they are caught. Either way the chase ends.</p>
12	<p>Snap Opportunity Randomly nominate 1d4 characters. Those participants may take an action to assist their side or act against the opposing side, provided they declare their action within a 5 second count down! The GM adjudicates what kinds of actions are possible in the circumstances, but might include making ranged attacks, casting spells, attempting to lasso a quarry, dropping caltrops, etc.</p>
13	<p>Major Obstruction The GM improvises a major physical obstruction of some kind (eg: <i>busy marketplace, slippery mud, spider webs, hail storm</i>). If the characters cannot bypass or resolve the major obstruction, the opposing side rolls to widen or close the gap.</p>
14	<p>Dangerous Hazard The GM improvises a physical threat of some kind (eg: <i>startled horse kick, snake nest, archway blade trap, hunter's arrow</i>). 1d4 characters must make a Dex save (DC 15) or suffer 3d4+level damage.</p>
15	<p>Burst of Speed The characters are inspired to dig deep and put on a final burst of speed. The characters roll to widen or close the gap.</p>
16	<p>Random Setback <i>Roll 1d6:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>1 - Drop something:</i> The character accidentally drops something valuable. Depending on the item, the GM might require a check to notice the loss. • <i>2 - Fatigue:</i> The character is overcome by unexpected fatigue and suffers 1 level of exhaustion. If an NPC, the character drops out of the chase. • <i>3 - Head Strike:</i> The character is struck on the head by an object. The character must make a Con save (DC 15) or be stunned and drop out of the chase. • <i>4 - Fall:</i> The character trips and falls, suffering a setback improvised by the GM (eg: falls down stairs, injured knee, damaged object, etc). • <i>5 - Hostile Third Party:</i> The character is beset upon by a hostile random encounter. The character must make a Dex save (DC 15) or drop out of the chase and deal with the random encounter.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>6 - Lost</i>: The character is somehow separated from any others. The character must make an Int save (DC 15) or become lost (momentarily or otherwise) and drop out of the chase.
17	<p>Snap Opportunity Randomly nominate 1d4 characters from both sides. Those participants may take an action to assist themselves or act against the opposing side, provided they declare their action within a 5 second count down! The GM adjudicates what kinds of actions are possible in the circumstances, but might include making ranged attacks, casting spells, attempting to lasso a quarry, dropping caltrops, etc.</p>
18	<p>Major Obstruction The GM improvises a physical obstruction of some kind (eg: <i>fenced off side alley, tree string noose trap, water logged dungeon passage, out of control airship</i>). If the characters cannot bypass or resolve the obstruction, the opposing side rolls to widen or close the gap.</p>
19	<p>Major Dangerous Hazard The GM improvises a physical threat of some kind (eg: <i>alchemist explosion, carnivorous plant, hallway dart trap, toxic airborne spores</i>). All characters must make an appropriate save (DC 15) or suffer 2d6+level damage and 1d2 Dex or Str loss.</p>
20	<p>All in! The whole party and up to the same number of characters from the opposing side, may take an action to assist themselves or act against their opponents, provided each player declares their action within a 5 second count down! The GM adjudicates what kinds of actions are possible in the circumstances, but might include making ranged attacks, casting spells, attempting to lasso a quarry, dropping caltrops, etc.</p>

Injuries & Setbacks Table

1d20	INJURIES & SETBACKS
1	Eye Injury. You have disadvantage on Perception/Investigation checks that rely on sight (blind if both eyes). Roll 1d20, on a 6+ the eye is damaged and can be mended with <i>Cure Minor Injury</i> or two months of rest. Otherwise the eye is lost. A <i>Regenerate</i> spell is required to restore a lost eye.
2	Arm or Hand Injury. You can no longer hold anything with two hands, and you can hold only a single object at a time. Roll 1d20, on a 6+ the limb is damaged and can be mended with <i>Cure Minor Injury</i> or two months of rest. Otherwise the limb is lost (1d6: 1-3 hand, 4-5: below elbow, 6: arm). A <i>Regenerate</i> spell is required to restore a lost limb.
3	Leg or Foot Injury. Your move speed is halved and you require a crutch or peg leg to walk. You have disadvantage on movement based Dex checks. Roll 1d20, on a 6+ the limb is damaged and can be mended with <i>Cure Minor Injury</i> or two months of rest. Otherwise the limb is lost (1d6: 1-3 foot, 4-6: below knee). A <i>Regenerate</i> spell is required to restore a lost limb.
4	Ear Injury. You have disadvantage on Perception/Investigation checks that rely on hearing (deaf if both ears). Roll 1d20, on a 6+ the ear is damaged and can be mended with <i>Cure Minor Injury</i> or two months of rest. Otherwise the ear is lost. A <i>Regenerate</i> spell is required to restore a lost ear.

5	Internal Bleeding. Whenever you attempt an action in combat, you must make a Con or Wis check vs DC 10 (your choice). If unsuccessful, you lose your action. <i>Cure Minor Injury</i> or 3d6 days of rest cures the injury.
6	Broken Ribs. Whenever you suffer physical damage, you must make a Con or Wis check vs DC 10 (your choice). On a failed check, you lose your next action. <i>Cure Minor Injury</i> or 3d6 days of rest mends the injury.
7	Nasty Scar. You gain a nasty looking scar on your head, neck, hands or other location not easily concealed. You have disadvantage on most Charisma checks (GM discretion). A <i>Regenerate</i> spell is required to remove the scar.
8	Swelling on the Brain. You suffer madness (1d6: 1-3 indefinite, 4-6 long term). The madness subsides as usual or <i>Cure Minor Injury</i> removes it.
9	Damaged Weapon. A weapon or item you are holding is damaged. Until repaired, the item cannot be used, imposes disadvantage or suffers some other penalty the DM determines. Magical items have a 50% chance to negate this effect.
10	Damaged Armour. Armour you are wearing is damaged. Until repaired, your armour provides only half the normal AC bonus (round down). Magical items have a 50% chance to negate this effect.
11	Damaged Magical Item. A randomly determined magical item (not a weapon or armour) is damaged. Until repaired, any attempt to use the item requires an Int check (DC 15). On a failure the DM improvises a setback or rolls on the <i>Wand of Wonder</i> chart.
12	Muscle Tear. Lose 1d4 Str, Dex or Con. <i>Cure Minor Injury</i> or 1d8 days of rest mends the injury.
13	Head Injury. Lose 1d4 Int, Perc, Will or Cha. <i>Cure Minor Injury</i> or 1d8 days of rest mends the injury.
14	Diseased Wound. Your hit point maximum is immediately reduced by 1d10, and again every morning the wound persists. If your hit point maximum reaches zero you die. <i>Cure Minor Injury</i> mends the wound. Alternatively tending with the Medicine skill cures the wound after 1d3 days.
15	Sprained Ankle. You must make a Dex check (DC 15) if you try to charge, jump or move twice in one round. If you fail the check, you fall prone. <i>Cure Minor Injury</i> or 1d6 days rest mends the injury.
16	System Shock. You have disadvantage on initiative checks. <i>Cure Minor Injury</i> or 1d3 days rest mends the injury.
17+	Minor Scar. A minor scar has no significant adverse effect, in fact after a few ales some folks might even be impressed by it. Some scars fade over time, others might require the <i>Regenerate</i> spell to erase completely.

Adapting to Permanent Injuries

In the absence of healing magic, an adventurer suffering permanent injuries will find ways to adapt over time (including hook hands, peg legs, adjusting to one eye, etc). The GM is encouraged reduce or eliminate penalties after one or more periods of downtime retraining.



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