Designing Encounters
by Rich Redman

Welcome to my bunker. As one of the designers of the **d20 Modern** *Roleplaying Game,* and a veteran of real-world modern combat (having served as a tank platoon leader in Operation: Desert Storm), I'm in a unique position to offer insights into the game.

Recently I had the chance to sit in on a meeting that also included Peter Archer, who manages the novel lines for Wizards of the Coast, Inc. During that meeting, he said something that stuck with me: "A good fantasy story is villain-driven." Because roleplaying games must devote so much space to adjudicating the creation and actions of heroes, villains often get pushed into the background. But the GM must be far more concerned with villains than with heroes, at both at the campaign and the individual encounter levels, or the game will lack the excitement of a memorable story.

Start with the Villains

Every GM designs adventures differently. The two basic schools of adventure planning are "winging it" and "preparing in advance." If you're using the first of those methods, you're not really "designing" anything. There's nothing wrong with making things up as you go along if it works for you and your players have fun, but this month's column focuses on the latter sort of adventures -- the ones in which you plan the encounters in advance.

When you sit down to design your adventure, start with the villains. Get inside the head of your mastermind and his (or her) associates. Know their goal, and the steps they must take to accomplish it. Then look carefully at those steps and identify ways for the heroes to get involved. For example, let's consider a villain I'll call Scorpio, who wants to use a nuclear weapon to destroy the Hoover Dam. Nuclear weapons cost money, so Scorpio sends his accomplices out to rob banks until he gets enough cash to purchase the raw materials he needs to build his bomb.

One advantage of this sort of storyline is that though the bad guy's goals and methods are relatively simple, there are several possible encounter locations (various banks, hideouts in cities where banks have been or will be robbed, Scorpio's lair, and the Hoover Dam itself) to keep the action interesting. There are also several different points at which the heroes can become involved with the story. They might be in a bank when it gets robbed, or they might be working in a laboratory that handles nuclear materials and become aware of shady dealings. They could even work for Department-7 investigating various odd crimes, including strings of bank robberies, unauthorized transfers of nuclear materials, or weapons smuggling. No matter how they get into the action, the heroes must follow a trail of clues leading back to Scorpio before they face off against him in the big showdown.

Get Specific

Once you have your villains' plot painted in broad strokes, start getting specific. Design small crews of GM characters to carry out specific tasks. For example, the adventure we've been discussing needs a bank robbery crew and a smuggling crew, at the very least. The bank robbers are probably very focused on

combat, but the smuggling crew needs good interaction skills to handle lots of bribery and lying. You'll also need to work up statistics for Scorpio himself, his team of nuclear weapons engineers, and a handful of guards for his lair.

Next, consider what these people are doing and equip them appropriately. The bank robbers probably wear medium armor (whether or not they're proficient with it) and carry shotguns or assault rifles, cell phones, rope or cable for tying up prisoners, tools for breaking and entering, and demolitions gear for cracking safes. Depending on what time of day they plan to carry out the robbery, they might need night-vision gear as well. This kind of equipment tends to be heavy, so they'll want one or more vans to carry it to the site, and they'll probably have to work together to move it into the bank. A crew of four to six people seems optimal for these tasks.

The smugglers, on the other hand, need body armor that they can conceal. They also need weapons, cell phones, large sums of cash for making their purchases, fast vehicles large enough to carry their goods, and a few other specific odds and ends, depending on what they're buying and from whom. This crew is likely to be smaller than the bank-robbing team -- probably no more than 2 to 4 people.

Know Your Heroes

The focus of the planning is on the villains, but you do need to consider the heroes at least briefly. Anyone who has GMed more than two RPG sessions knows that you can never plan for all the possible actions heroes might take. What you can and should do, however, is review the skills, feats, equipment, and attack bonuses of heroes. Look at what your heroes can do and provide opportunities for them to do it.

I really can't stress this point enough. Good adventure design lets heroes use their resources -- especially those they have gained most recently. You should let players feel good about their heroes' achievements by allowing them to use new class abilities, equipment, and contacts. They may not remember to do so, but they should at least have the opportunity.

Timing Is Everything

By this time, you know your villains' goals and the steps they'll take to accomplish them. You also know what your heroes' best assets are.

The next item to consider is timing -- that is, at what point in the villains' plan your heroes can get involved. Choose this aspect carefully, since much depends on how prepared they are. For example, if you plan to have your heroes in the bank when the robbers arrive, the encounter will probably be more difficult than its EL indicates. The heroes are likely to be unarmed, or armed only lightly, and not wearing a lot of body armor. If they are higher in level than the robbers, those disadvantages might be acceptable; otherwise, you may want to reconsider. If the heroes are near a bank that's being robbed, they have a chance to grab equipment and respond, but they could also choose to find good places to watch and simply wait for the police and the FBI. If the heroes investigate a bank robbery after it occurs, they're not in much danger, but they're likely to make a lot of skill checks, and you'll want to consider the DCs for those checks. By determining when you get the heroes involved, you also establish which details are important in the encounter and what level of threat it poses to the heroes.

Suppose you decide that the heroes must respond to the robbery while it's in progress. Now you have to

determine whether they'll have the chance to respond at the beginning (when the robbers are still unloading their gear from the vans), in the middle (when the robbers are inside with all their equipment), or at the end (when the robbers are carrying their loot and equipment back out to the vans). In fact, the heroes might arrive just as the vans pull away and have to take part in a car chase! The more time you give the heroes to prepare, the more advantages they should have.

You should also plan encounters so that your heroes can afford a few days in the hospital if need be. Even in campaign models such as *Urban Arcana*, magical healing is rarely available at low levels. Fortunately, you'll usually have a fair degree of latitude in setting the pace of the adventure, and you can alter it mid-game as you see fit. In the adventure we're building here, for example, the GM has total control over the pace of Scorpio's operation and how much money he needs. If the heroes avoid injury and investigate quickly, then Scorpio either needs less money than you originally planned or gets more from each bank his minions rob. Alternatively, if the heroes keep getting hurt or failing skill checks, then Scorpio needs more money or gets less from each bank. Whenever you plan your adventures, allow for delays due to injury and stay flexible in terms of the timing.

Location, Location, Location

It should be obvious that details of specific locations can have a major impact on encounters. Careful planning of encounter locations can give your heroes the tools they need to overcome the opposition.

Your villains' actions should provide you with a list of locations where encounters may occur. In Scorpio's plot, we have banks, the streets and alleys around banks, weapons labs, the grounds around those labs, truck stops where the smugglers take breaks, Scorpio's lair, and Hoover Dam.

Now let's plan out the rest of that bank robbery encounter, figuring that the heroes will arrive as the robbery ends. If they respond very quickly, the bank robbers are still inside the bank when the heroes arrive on the scene. If the heroes stall, plan, and dither, they arrive just as the bank robbers are finishing loading their vans.

Your knowledge of your heroes is very important when it comes to planning the details of the encounter site. If one of them likes to use a sniper or hunting rifle, you need to place a spot on the encounter map that allows long-range shooting. You probably also want lots of opportunities for cover and concealment, such as dumpsters, building corners, and deep shadows. In addition, you should provide the heroes with a reasonable chance to block the villains' escape and avoid a car chase if they think to try. In practical terms, this means that the number of obvious exits from the scene should be equal to or less than the number of vehicles available to the heroes. Notice I said OBVIOUS exits. If the heroes dither too long, the crew should be able to make its own exit with a successful Drive check, by ramming though hedges, jumping a curb, or the like.

Finally, you should give serious thought to providing useful scene dressing fire escapes and hanging objects to swing on. Heavy items suspended in the air are also a plus, since clever heroes can shoot the cables and drop them on the villains. If you want to be funny, you can even arrange for a melon stand and someone delivering sheets of plate glass.

Encounter Levels

The encounter we've designed above is a bank robbery committed by four to six of Scorpio's minions. This is a high-threat encounter (see Determining Encounter Levels in Chapter Seven: Gamemastering of the **d20 Modern** *Roleplaying Game*). According to Table 7-6: CR Adjustment, the EL should fall between 5 and 7. The higher the heroes are in level, the more likely they are to win the encounter, but even lower-level heroes can handle this encounter with some careful planning.

First, remember that the heroes have the advantage. They know the bank is being robbed, but the robbers don't know the heroes are approaching. The heroes are outside the bank with room to maneuver, while the robbers are limited by the bank's doors and windows, as well as their need to get to their vans to escape. In our planning, we gave the heroes plenty of opportunities for fighting at long range and for using cover and concealment.

Second, consider the robbers. If they left a lookout by the vans, the heroes may be able to take that person prisoner with a successful Intimidate check. If they're particularly sneaky, they may even be able to steal weapons from the robbers' vans. After all, if the robbers need assault rifles, they'll want them outside the bank they're robbing because they need to get as much money into the vans as possible while still avoiding arrest or apprehension. Chances are that only a few robbers will fight back, while the rest try to load the vans. They're less interested in killing heroes than they are in escaping, and they may be so focused on getting away that they leave evidence or injured companions behind. The robbers may also be encumbered by their own equipment.

Finally, if the heroes are particularly low in level, consider limiting the robbers to shotguns or handguns. Handguns are easier to rationalize, since they're lighter and the robbers are already carrying lots of other heavy equipment. This choice gives heroes with long-range weapons yet another advantage.

Remember also that villains who escape can be encountered again, either at the next robbery or in Scorpio's lair. And if the heroes get in real trouble, law enforcement can always show up to rescue them, or at least distract the villains by giving them more targets. You could even make the encounter moderate or low threat by having the villains take hostages, making success more a matter of negotiation than shooting.

To Fudge or Not to Fudge

Once the planning is over, you must react to heroes' actions, crafting the villains' responses based on what they know about the heroes and what they perceive of their effectiveness and cunning. You roll the dice for the villains, and sometimes those dice just roll unusually high.

Even when heroes act with cunning and resourcefulness and do everything right, the villain might roll a natural 20 for an attack, another to confirm the threat, and then deal maximum damage. That's a good time for you as GM to fudge your own die rolls. On the other hand, sometimes heroes ignore all the advantages you've provided for them and all your warnings of danger, choosing instead to stand under a streetlight with a bullhorn and demand that the villains surrender. If the dice come up lethal for such a hero, don't fudge. Reward resourcefulness and cleverness, not thoughtlessness and blind optimism.

Summary

Let's review the steps for planning an effective and exciting encounter.

- Start with the villains. Set their goals and determine how they will accomplish them.
- Get specific. Start designing GM characters based on what they need to accomplish.
- Know your heroes. Let them play with their toys.
- Timing is everything. Manipulate the timing of the encounter to control the danger level.
- Design the encounter area so that heroes can use their abilities and equipment to their best advantage.
- Encounter Levels don't tell the whole story. The villains' equipment, the timing of the encounter, and the details of the location all affect the danger level for the heroes, even though they don't change the EL.
- Fudging is a way to reward cleverness and resourcefulness when things go horribly wrong through no fault of your heroes.

About the Author

Before [Rich Redman](#)came to the RPG R&D department at Wizards of the Coast, Inc., he had been an Army officer, a door-to-door salesman, the manager of a computer store, a fundraiser for a veterans' assistance group, and the manager of Wizards of the Coast, Inc.'s Customer Service department. Rich is a prolific game designer who has worked on the **Dungeons & Dragons** game, the *d20 Modern* *Roleplaying Game,* the ***Marvel Super Heroes*** *Adventure Game,* and **Dark*Matter**. When he's not working as vice president of [The Game Mechanics](#), a d20 design studio, Rich does freelance game design, cooks, and practices yoga, tai chi, and silat.