



Bullet Points

Running the Game

by Charles Ryan

Welcome to the nineteenth installment of *Bullet Points*. I'm Charles Ryan, one of the designers of the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game**. I'm here to answer your questions about the game, offer advice on tricky issues, and give you a little peek into the minds of the designers. You'll be hearing from me every couple of weeks.

If you've checked out the earlier installments of *Bullet Points*, you know the format. Every two weeks I pick an issue that's provoked a lot of questions or comments, begin with a general discussion of the topic, and then answer specific questions related to it. If there are any unrelated but pressing questions in my mailbox, I might tackle them at the end of the column, but only if there's room and they can't wait for an appropriately themed column.

Running the Game

This installment is especially for GMs, since there have been many questions about adjudicating the game in play. Before I get started, though, I want to talk a bit about the logic of the game. "Where's the logic in that?" is a question I sometimes get relating to some particular rule -- usually one that doesn't seem realistic enough to the player. But rather than spend a whole *Bullet Points* installment defending a bunch of specific rules, I thought I'd address the larger issue of game logic.

This story begins, as many stories do, with a cat. My wife and I recently rescued a sick and injured stray cat in our neighborhood. Taking it in was undoubtedly a good deed, but at the time, the cat didn't think so. Despite our experience and precautions, I was bitten -- hard.

Two days later, I was in the emergency room with a thumb the size of a nectarine. Like many cat bites, this one had become seriously infected. The docs cleaned it out and pumped me full of antibiotics, then sent me on my way. The entire process (not counting the hours in the waiting room) took about 15 minutes. By getting reasonably prompt treatment, I avoided the fate of another WotC designer who, after being bitten by his own cat and letting the wound heal without realizing it was infected, ended up spending several days in the hospital and losing the ability to bend his finger. But even he avoided the fate that might easily have befallen both of us had we been bitten by cats just 50 or 100 years ago -- the loss of a finger, a hand, or maybe even our lives.

How could a simple housecat bite, which according to the rather generous (in this case) rules of the d20 System shouldn't deal more than 1 hp of damage, result in such dire consequences? Simply put, without modern antibiotics, infection -- even from minor wounds, if they're deep and dirty -- is a real killer. In the old days, people who survived serious trauma very rarely survived the infections that followed. Those who did often bore serious handicaps for the rest of their lives -- which were usually shortened. The fact that the d20 System (especially D&D, with its medieval setting) doesn't include rules for infection is an affront to any claim of "realism." A d20 character can suffer hundreds of wounds over his career without the slightest concern for infection. Where's the logic in that?

To find the answer, you have to look beyond the simulation of reality. As with other forms of storytelling, we rightfully expect roleplaying games to suspend our disbelief; to not distract us with elements that strain our credulity. But a roleplaying game is just that -- a game. It's not a simulation. A realistic simulation would certainly benefit from sophisticated rules for infection and its consequences. A game, on the other hand, would simply become less fun. As long as the lack of rules for infection doesn't hurt our suspension of disbelief in the world and the story, the game is better off without them.


I've been lectured by players about how modern body armor often distributes the damage from gunshots into large bruises, and told that there should be rules for converting some portion of gunshot damage from "missed" attacks into bludgeoning damage. But it's never occurred to these folks that chainmail works the same way, and that a perfect simulation in their D&D games would result in missed sword blows converting some damage to bludgeoning. Some players are very unhappy that damage from autofire depends on a Reflex save because that means armor isn't a factor. But these same players rarely complain about armor not protecting against grenade attacks, or against *fireballs*. Some players have stated authoritatively that firearms should work like magic rays, or like cone effects -- never mind that bows, crossbows, and other direct-fire medieval weapons don't.

In all of these cases, the rules could be made more realistic. Indeed, we've always encouraged you to create your own house rules if the existing ones strain your suspension of disbelief. Just remember that while alternate rules may better serve the logic of the simulation, there's also a certain logic to letting a game be a game.

Wow. That little discussion turned out a bit longer than I anticipated. What say I get down off my high horse and answer a few questions now?

Questions and Answers

GMs, here's a little help in adjudicating some of those situations that the rules don't may not address clearly (or logically).


 **As a guideline, how much time should elapse between surprise rounds? For example, suppose a hero sneaks into a compound, surprises some guards, and shoots at them. Now, we can all agree that he shouldn't just be able to run around the corner or throw a smoke grenade, hide again, and get another surprise round. But how long should it take for the guards to be able to be surprised again? If more heroes or guards sneak onto the scene, and their enemies don't detect them, how is that handled? Is surprise no longer a factor after a combat begins?**

A surprise round occurs any time initiative is rolled and some characters are surprised. Thus, there is the potential for a surprise round at the beginning of every encounter. Furthermore, there is no minimum time that must elapse between encounters.

When one encounter ends, you'll probably want to end that initiative sequence and roll again when the next encounter begins, even if that's just a minute later. With the start of a new encounter, there's the possibility of a surprise round.

If the guards in a compound have heard gunfire, they're likely to be alert. It'll be hard to get the drop on them because they're probably on the lookout for intruders or attackers. But just because they're alert doesn't mean that they can't be surprised.


Incidentally, simply providing yourself with concealment (by using a smoke grenade, for example) doesn't automatically allow you to surprise your opponent. If someone threw a smoke grenade in your direction, you might not be able to see her, but you sure as heck wouldn't be surprised by her appearance!

 **The EL of an encounter is based in part on its threat level. What if the threat level changes based on what the players do? I say such a circumstance shouldn't change the EL of the encounter, but my friend says that when the players' actions make the encounter less difficult (by reducing it from a high-threat encounter to a low-threat one), the EL should change and the heroes should get less experience. Who is correct?**


A situation like the one you describe is very much in the realm of GM adjudication. Your judgment in cases like this is part of the game. The intention of the rules, however, is that the threat level should be based on the potential threat offered by the encounter, independent of the characters' actions. If the bad guys intend to harm or kill the heroes, and violence is the most likely course of action, it's a high-threat encounter. If the heroes manage to circumvent the greatest dangers or end the encounter without violence, that's terrific. But it doesn't change the CR adjustment for the opposition; so the heroes are still entitled to XP for a high-threat encounter.

If you find that your players are frequently circumventing high-threat encounters, you may want to revisit either your definition of "high threat" or the nature of your encounters. If you intend your encounters to be life-threatening, but they consistently aren't because the heroes use their abilities to get around the dangers, you should probably start treating the encounters as low threat. Alternatively, you could alter your approach and create other kinds of encounters that are more dangerous to the heroes -- and probably more exciting for the players as well.

As a final note, remember that "high threat" doesn't mean an encounter that's likely to kill the heroes. The game is designed around the principle that a typical encounter with an EL equal to the heroes' average level should use up about 20% of their resources (including hit points). So if a bunch of heroes, each with 20 hit points, goes into a high-threat encounter, it's not unreasonable for them to lose about 4 hit points each. Sure, they're not likely to die from such an encounter, but it still qualifies perfectly as high threat.

 **After a character fails his Constitution check for running and must rest, how should he be treated in terms of fighting? I have been using the shaken condition to represent the fact that the characters are somewhat winded, but maybe I missed something or there is a better way.**

Running produces no detrimental effects until the hero can't run anymore. At that point, the only detrimental effect is the fact that he can't run any more.


 **As I understand it, a Wealth check represents the time and effort a hero puts into making a purchase as much as it does the cash she throws around. So what happens if a hero knows of a specific place where she can get something -- say, if she has a recommendation or has gone there before for the same thing. How does this kind of circumstance affect the purchase DC of an item?**

If your characters have specific in-game information on how and where to obtain an item, it's fine to ignore the time requirement for shopping (see Shopping and Time on page 91 of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*). In fact, for routine purchases of items with low to moderate purchase DCs, it's usually OK to ignore


those rules or use them as very loose guidelines.

For more exotic items with higher purchase DCs, having an idea of where to shop shouldn't affect the time rules. Just because a hero saw a Barrett Light Fifty at a particular store (or in the inventory of a particular black market dealer) a few weeks ago doesn't mean it's still there. However, if the heroes have a particularly good lead, you could ignore or modify the shopping and time rules accordingly.

I wouldn't change the purchase DC or modify the check based solely on a lead about where to purchase something. If a character has a particular relationship that might benefit her in a purchase (such as an arms dealer who owes her a favor, or a sister who happens to run a car dealership), you might consider reducing the purchase DC of an item by 1 or 2 points, or even giving the hero a +2 circumstance bonus on her Wealth check. But such advantages should be few and far between. In fact, you might want to think of them as part of the "treasure" for the adventure, reducing other rewards accordingly to keep the overall rewards for the heroes' efforts in balance.

 **Helpless targets include not only sleeping, unconscious, or bound characters, but also those who are unaware of a character's presence. Does that mean a hero who surprises a guard from behind can perform a coup de grace on him? What if the guard knows there are intruders in the building? What about a character who is alert for attacks, but doesn't realize that one of his friends is about to betray him?**

There's some leeway for GM adjudication on the issue of character helplessness, but none of the situations you describe should allow a coup de grace. If the guard was incompetent, working at a job in which no attack would be expected, and dozing (or, at the outside, completely enraptured watching the Miss America pageant on TV), maybe a coup de grace would be allowable -- provided that he was completely unaware of his surroundings and had taken no precautions at all. If the guard is allowed a Spot check (in other words, if he's the least bit alert), he shouldn't ever be subject to a coup de grace. It may be easy to catch him flat-footed, however, and that condition makes him subject to a number of feats (such as Knockout Punch) that produce end results rather like a nonlethal coup de grace.

 **The section on nonlethal damage states that a character must make a save if she takes nonlethal damage equal to or greater than her Constitution score. What about the Improved Damage Threshold feat -- does this apply to the threshold for nonlethal damage the way it does for the regular massive damage threshold?**

Yes. In fact, on page 141, under Nonlethal Damage, every instance of the term "Constitution score" should instead say "massive damage threshold."

 **A dying character loses 1 hp every round. When does this loss take place -- on the character's turn, or at the end of the round?**

The character makes a Fortitude save each round, on his turn. If he fails the save, he immediately loses 1 hp.

Do you have a rules question about the d20 Modern Roleplaying Game? Send it to bulletpoints@wizards.com. For the quickest possible answer, please put the topic of your question in the

subject line and keep the question as succinct as possible. If you have more than one question, feel free to send two or more emails -- but for best results please include only one question per email unless your questions are very closely related to one another. Please don't expect a direct answer by email. Check back here every other week for the latest batch of answers!

About the Author

Charles Ryan was one of the designers of the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game**. He has been designing and editing games for more than twelve years. His other credits include such diverse titles as the *The Wheel of Time Roleplaying Game*, *Deadlands*, *Millennium's End*, *The Last Crusade*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Dune: Chronicles of the Imperium*, and *Star Trek: Red Alert!*, to name just a few. Charles served as Chairman of the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts & Design, the professional organization of the games industry, from 1996 through 2001. He lives in Kent, Washington with his lovely wife Tammie, three cats, two rats, and a dog. He works for Wizards of the Coast, Inc.



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