

Four Things You've Never Heard of That Make Encounters Not Suck

by The Angry DM

Welcome to the third part in my increasingly inaccurately named series: Getting the Most of Your Skill System. In the first two parts (Five Simple Rules for Dating My Teenaged Skill System and Adjudicating Actions like a Motherf\$&%ing Boss), I told you everything I could think of about handling every action your players might throw at you. And you might be thinking you have everything you need to run a role-playing game. An RPG is basically just a string of actions in a mostly logical sequence. Well, you aren't crazy to think that, but DMs wear two hats. The stylish fedora of running the game and the practical accountant's visor of planning the game (Fun Fact of the Day: it is called a green eyeshade or dealer's visor).

But Twitter buddy @clampclontoller wants to try on his accounting visor. "Angry," he said to me, "your brilliant articles about skills and actions changed my life. I'm running better games, my players love me, and I even won the lottery. I gave a copy of your articles to my friend, but he didn't read them. The next day, his cat left him and his children developed hairy foreheads due to a glandular condition." He went on like that for a while. It was embarrassing, really. But ultimately, he got around to asking a question: "I want to write a chase scene based on your Five Simple Rules. How would you do that?"

Well, @Clampclontoller, the answer is that I would not build a chase scene using my Five Simple Rules. Thanks for asking. I hope you all enjoyed this article. Goodbye.

Okay. I guess you deserve more of an answer than that. As I hinted, Five Simple Rules... and Adjudicating Actions... are all about the rakish fedora of game runnery. But building an encounter is not something you do while wearing a fedora. You need to put your visor on. We would need a completely different article for that. Maybe two. But who could write them?

All right, I'll do it.

The Beginning of a Whole New Article! Or Two!

Once you understand how to resolve actions, you can keep the game rolling along without swerving out of control and smashing into a tree. And for some DMs, that is enough. They are content to improvise an entire game out of reacting to what the players do and say.

But, to butcher a sports metaphor, action resolution is the bunny slope of DMing. Sure, you are technically skiing, but you can't do any of the really cool tricks unless you can catch some air. You need ramps and moguls and cliffs to ski off of (I assume skiers ski off cliffs). And bunny slopes don't have ramps and cliffs. Just bunnies. And hitting a bunny doesn't get you enough hang time to do anything good with.

And even if you do want to rely heavily on improvisation, you can think more than one move ahead of the players if you understand how to plan and structure games. Improvisation is not about operating without a plan, it is about planning and executing at the same time.

So, whether you are an improviser or a planner or (like most people) a little of both, now that you can get yourself down the bunny slope of DMing without breaking any bones, it is time to take the next step. It is time to ski off the cliff that is encounter building. Yes, you read that correctly. Encounter building is like skiing off a cliff. I'm just not quite sure how.

I'm going to break this into two parts. In this first part, I'm going to explain four key concepts that lie at the heart of every encounter (even combat encounters) and explain how understanding those concepts will help you run better encounters. In the second part, I'm going to use those concepts (and a few other bits and pieces) to build a chase scene for @Clampclontoller.

But, before I can even start talking about any of that, I need to tell you what the hell the word 'encounter' even means!

Just What the Hell is an Encounter?

I could tell you that an 'encounter' is similar to a 'scene' in a movie or book. In fact, I'm going to. An 'encounter' is similar to a 'scene' in a movie or book. In fact, a lot of DMs use the words 'encounter' and 'scene' interchangeably. And you probably have some sense of what a scene is because I assume you've watched a movie or read a book at some point. But if I asked you to define a scene, you'd probably struggle a bit. It is one of those things you have a vague sense of, but can't really define.

Let's tackle this from a different direction. An RPG is just a big ole pile of actions, right? And when I say action, I mean an entire action that starts with a player's decision to act and ends with a resolution (sing along: intention, approach, outcome, consequences). But you can string certain sequences of actions together those sequences are called encounters. You can also string a bunch of encounters together into an adventure. And you can string bunches of adventures together into a campaign. You could also talk about acts and arcs if you really want to get fancy.

So, there is this structural hierarchy (look at that fancy phrase!) in most RPGs:

Action - Encounter - (Act) - Adventure - (Arc) - Campaign

Some RPGs fiddle with the names of the elements or shift some elements around, but, few RPGs actually change the actual structure. And that's good. Because the structure is useful.

When you are wearing your Fedora of Game Runnery, you may be working with individual actions, but you are always fitting those actions together into the overall structure of the game. The actions happen within an encounter and the encounters link together into an adventure. See?

And when you are wearing your Green Eyeshade of Game Plannery, you can't work with individual actions. Actions always start with a player's decision. So, you have to work with the higher level structures: Encounters, Adventures, and Campaigns.

But none of this DMing theory wankery tells us what an encounter is. It just tells us that it is bigger than an action, smaller than a adventure, and it is the primary structure DMs work with when planning games.

So, Just What The Hell is an Encounter? For Real, This Time

An encounter is a sequence of actions that answer a dramatic question by resolving one or more conflicts.

I know that sounds like a bunch of liberal arts, literary bull#&\$ that should be discussed by people who are serving you a latte, but don't worry. I'm not going soft. That is a useful, powerful definition that will help you run better games.

So, let's start digging into that definition like a squirrel digging up a precious bone.

1: Dramatic Questions are Not Just Questions with Exclamation Points

The dramatic question is the alpha and the omega of every encounter, the beginning and the end. I mean that figuratively and literally (and literarily too, ha ha ha). Every encounter begins by posing a dramatic question and it ends when the players have an answer to that question.

A dramatic question is just statement of the heroes' current objective in the scene rephrased into a yes-or-no question:

"Does Indiana Jones escape from the collapsing Hovito temple?"

"Can Indiana Jones escape from the horde of Hovito warriors?"

"Will Indiana Jones get the headpiece of the Staff of Kings from Marion Ravenwood?"

"Does Indiana Jones recover the Ark of the Covenant from the Nazi convoy?"

The dramatic question tells us (the audience) what is at stake in the scene. Why is the scene important? Why is it worth playing? What is it we need to find out in this scene? And when we have the answer to that question, the scene is over. When Indy drives away with the Ark, we know the answer is yes and the scene is finished. There is nothing left to find out.

An encounter in a role-playing works exactly like a scene in Raiders of the Lost Ark, except for two important details. First, the heroes usually aren't nearly as cool as Indiana Jones. Second, the audience and the heroes are actually the same people. So, when I say that an encounter ends when the audience knows the answer to the dramatic question, I mean that it ends when the players know the answer to the dramatic question.

Thinking about dramatic questions is a very powerful thing. In order to demonstrate how powerful it is, allow me to explain why your combat encounters suck.

Why Your Combat Encounter Suck (Part 1)

"The heroes are traveling through a cave, trying to reach some Underdark city with an unpronounceable name to deliver medicine. Suddenly, a giant spider drops from the ceiling and attacks the party."

You, being a hypothetically bad DM, didn't stop to think about the dramatic question. You just wanted to see a fight with a giant spider, so you dropped one in the path of the heroes. And now, the heroes and the spider will fight until one side is dead and the adventure can continue. You'll make sure of that.

I, being the brilliant DM who understand dramatic questions, realize that the dramatic question in this scene is "can the party safely pass through the cave and continue their journey?" That is what is at stake. There is no reason, in this scene, for the party to care whether the spider lives or dies. So, when the cleric in my party immobilizes the spider and the party flees past the spider and into the tunnels beyond it, I realize that my encounter is over.

So, you ignored the dramatic question, so a default question took over. “Can the party kill the spider?” I did not. I figured out the action question and thought about what was really at stake. That opened me to more solutions. My party could have killed the spider. But they didn’t have to. I focused on what was really at stake. So I never ran the risk of a combat running on too long and getting boring.

More importantly, suppose I was building that encounter before the game. And suppose I really did want a life or death struggle with a giant spider. I would have realized that my dramatic question was not necessarily going to give me that. I would have recognized that I needed to build the encounter differently to make sure the party cared about killing the spider.

Dramatic questions give your encounters meaning and tell you why the encounter is important. As long as the dramatic question remains unanswered (in the minds of the players), the scene is tense and exciting. Once the question has been answered, the scene has no more tension and excitement. It becomes boring. That is why fights become boring once it becomes obvious the heroes have won (or lost).

Dramatic questions also help you, the DM, determine the intention that goes along with every action. Knowing what is at stake and why the players care, you know what they are trying to do. So, knowing the dramatic question helps you adjudicate actions.

Dramatic questions also tell you when an encounter isn’t exciting or interesting enough to bother with. If the question is not interesting, the encounter won’t be either. Think about the number of times this dramatic question has been played with dice rolls at people’s tables: “do the players manage to locate an inn in town?” Has it ever been exciting? The answer is no. No, it has not.

And, as already mentioned, dramatic questions tell you when the encounter is over and what that ending has to look like. The ending of the encounter must answer the question with certainty.

Posing the Dramatic Question

I said that an encounter begins by posing a dramatic question. That doesn’t mean you should start every encounter by stating it out loud. But it does mean you should state the question in your head at the start of every encounter. In fact, you damn well better do just that. From now on, you are not allowed to run an encounter without first stating the dramatic question in your head.

When you design an encounter, or even when you read one before running the game, though, you should also state the dramatic question to yourself. Just make sure you do it again once the encounter actually starts. Remember the dramatic question is a statement of the players’ actual objectives and goals in that scene. The players may approach an encounter with different goals than you originally planned on.

Even if you are improvising a scene, start by stating the dramatic question to yourself. You are not allowed to ever run an encounter without stating the dramatic question to yourself in your head. If you can’t state the dramatic question, you can’t explain why the players should care about the scene and you don’t know how the scene should end. How the f\$&% can you actually run a scene like that? You can’t.

If a scene comes out of nowhere and you aren’t sure what the players hope to accomplish, ask them!

Player: “We go back and confront Herbert the Cultist.”

DM (realizing he has no idea why the party wants to talk to Herbert): “Okay. What is it you want to know from Herbert?”

Player: “We think he knows where the Secret Tower of Secrecy is and we’re going to make him tell us.”

DM: “Oh! Well, you return to the Cult of the Mucous-Covered Fish and find Herbert hard at work...”

Remember that the players must always be uncertain about the answer to the dramatic question, but that doesn’t mean you have to be. If Herbert the Cultist has no idea where the Secret Tower of Secrecy is, there is no way the players can learn it. The answer to the question: “can the heroes learn the location of the Secret Tower of Secrecy” is no, in this case. But until the players know that, the scene is a good one.

If you are struggling to pose a dramatic question, imagine a reality television show announcer setting up your encounter.

“Deep in the Underdark, a group of heroes struggles to bring medicine to a plague-ridden city. But their path takes them through the lair of a deadly giant spider. Can the heroes safely pass through the cave? Find out, in tonight’s thrilling encounter!”

But never, never, never try to run or build an encounter unless you can pose the dramatic question.

2: Conflicts - Because Nothing is Ever Easy

Every encounter begins by posing a dramatic question and ends when the players know the answer to that question. But a dramatic question alone does not make for a good encounter. If the players can just answer the question any way they want, the encounter isn't exciting. That is why we need one or more conflicts.

In dramatic, literary, and role-playing-gamery terms, a conflict occurs when the heroes are prevented from achieving their objectives. Obviously, monsters and NPCs can be sources of conflict, but so can traps, hazards, and obstacles. Capricious gods and intangible forces of the universe can also be sources of conflict, like fate and nature. A state of mind or a disagreement within the party can be a source conflict.

But notice that I called those things sources of conflict. That's because conflict occurs between two forces, usually the heroes and something else. A spider in a room is not a conflict. It is not even a potential conflict by itself. And mistaking a spider in a room for a conflict is another reason why your combat encounters suck.

Why Your Combat Encounters Suck (Part 2)

"The heroes are traveling through a cave, trying to reach some Underdark city with an unpronounceable name to deliver medicine. Suddenly, a giant spider drops from the ceiling."

What is the source of conflict in this scene? I don't know why I'm even asking you. You didn't even give any thought to the dramatic question. As the scene is presented, there is NO source of conflict. The spider is in the way of the party. What keeps the party from walking around the spider and continuing their trip? You might decide that the answer to that question is that the spider intercepts the party and tries to kill them and I would expect that kind of c\$&% at this point. But you still don't have a source of conflict. All you have is a mess.

"The spider jealously guards its lair, attacking anyone who sets foot in its cave." That? That is a source of conflict. "The spider is protecting its egg sac and will attempt to kill anyone who gets too close to it." That is also a source of conflict. So is "the spider is desperately hungry and will attempt to devour any living thing it becomes aware of."

Why does a conflict occur? Because the party wants to walk through the cave and the spider wants to attack anyone in its home. The party and the spider both can't have what they want. The party can't walk through the cave as long as the spider wants to protect it. The spider is not protecting its lair if it lets the party wander around in it. Like Voldemort and Harry Potter, neither goal can live while the other survives.

Now, you might say it doesn't matter for practical purposes. Right? What is the difference why the conflict occurs? Well, if the spider is the "protecting the lair" spider, once the party leaves the cave (accomplishing its goal), the spider no longer cares about them. The conflict is resolved. The "protecting her eggs" spider might let the party skirt the edges of the

room as long as they don't get too close, resolving the conflict. And the starving spider will chase the party into the tunnel, delaying the answer to the dramatic question.

That is why you have to understand the difference between a thing (a spider), a source of conflict (the spider's desire to protect her lair), and the conflict itself (the spider's desire to protect her lair vs. the party's desire to walk through her lair).

You also have to understand that DMs do not create conflicts, they create sources of conflict. A good encounter is a trainwreck. But DMs don't wreck the trains. They just put the trains on the same tracks so that, once the party starts driving the trains around, they are going to crash. But, not in a railroading way. I don't mean railroading. Damn it, this metaphor is a trainwreck.

Once you learn how to set up conflict properly, you can run, build, and improvise better encounters. You won't just drop a monster in front of the party and make them fight. Unless you want to. "The monster wants to kill the party and is willing to die trying" is a perfectly valid source of conflict, just as "can the heroes survive the battle" or "can the heroes kill the monsters" are valid dramatic questions. As long as you purposely chose them.

The Motives of Brainless Things (And I Don't Mean Players)

Conflicts occur when desires and objectives clash. But I claimed that all sorts of things could be potential sources of conflict. How can a door have a desire? Or a trap? Or a river? Or nature itself? Well, we have to be willing to personify a little bit.

A locked door, for example, is a physical manifestation of someone's desire to keep everyone without the key out of room. If the heroes want to get inside the room, they are going to come into conflict with the door. A trap is likewise a manifestation of a desire to hinder, injure, kill, entrap, or provide a warning. Now, you might say that all of that amounts to the same thing as just dropping doors and traps in the way of the party, but it doesn't. When it comes to traps, especially, forcing yourself to think about why the trap exists and who built it for what purpose will lead you to create better traps that make good sense. Again, you will run a better game.

A river is a source of conflict because it will not bend its course for anyone. If the river is in your way, you cannot appeal to its mercy, its kindness, or its desires. And if you plunge yourself into it, the river does not care who you are. It will sweep you away. Or drown you. A river is actually a manifestation of the force of nature, which cannot be controlled or dominated, lacks sympathy or care, and kills those who do not respect it without guilt or shame.

You can write more powerful, more interesting games once you understand conflict in terms of motives and desires and begin ascribing them to abstract concepts and inanimate objects. Consider Athas, the setting for the Dark Sun campaign. In that setting, depending on the DM who is running it, nature is impersonal and indomitable, killing indiscriminately or it is outright vengeful, attempting to kill anyone anyone ventures beyond the cities in revenge for how the civilized races ravaged it. Some of the most compelling aspects of Sigil, the city at the heart of Planescape, was the city's desire to maintain its status as neutral ground and to keep itself free of the influence of the gods.

Death and Other Ways to End Conflict

As long as the heroes attempt to fulfill their goals clashes with some other force trying to fulfill its desires, and both the hero and the force are free to act, a conflict continues. Once the

desires, motives, and goals of the heroes and other forces are no longer in opposition, the conflict is resolved. Alternatively, once one side loses the ability to oppose the other, the conflict is resolved.

So, if the heroes kill the spider or if the heroes get safely out of the room, the conflict is resolved. Likewise, if the heroes stop trying to get across the room or get killed by the spider, the conflict is resolved. If the heroes break the lock on the door, the conflict is resolved because the door can no longer oppose them. If the heroes dam the river, the river is no longer in their way. Likewise, once the heroes build a boat and row to the other side, the conflict is over. If Fate accepts the hero as the Chosen One and allows him to take the Sword of Omens, the conflict is over. If the goblin loses the will to fight, the conflict is over. And so on and so on and so on.

It doesn't matter how a conflict is resolved. Once the clash of desires has ended somehow, the conflict ends. And if there are no further conflicts, the dramatic question is answered and the encounter is over.

Multiple Conflicts: Opening More than One Front

In a simple encounter, a single source of conflict is all that is needed. But you can get creative and throw multiple sources of conflict into a scene. You can also create sources of conflict for your sources of conflict.

Imagine the party is traveling to a distant city through the woods and you decide it is time to have some fun with an encounter. So, you start by posing a dramatic question: "can the heroes continue their journey safely." For a source of conflict, you put in "a warband of hungry orcs that want to kill and eat the party." But then, you also add "a rainstorm that makes it difficult to see and used ranged weapons." And then, just to add some hilarity, you add "a forest fire that sweeps across the fire consuming everything it touches."

The orcs want to kill the party. The party wants to survive the encounter. The rain wants to blind everyone and prevent missile combat. The fire wants to burn everything it can reach. The orcs and the party are in direct opposition. The party wants to live; the orcs want them to die. Now, presumably the orcs also want to live, which brings both the orcs and the heroes into opposition with the fire that wants to burn everything that touches it. The rain is not in opposition to anyone just yet. But the moment someone needs to see clearly or tries to use bow, regardless of who they are, the rain is going to oppose them. So orcs vs. heroes, orcs vs. fire, heroes vs. fire, archers vs. rain.

That is an exciting scene! Maybe too exciting. But no matter. It'll be fun to watch how it plays out. When you design an encounter, you can add as many sources of conflict as you wish, and more complex encounters need multiple sources of conflict. But you need to think about how your sources of conflict might come into conflict with each other. And you need to think about something else. Because there is actually another conflict in that scene that hasn't been mentioned. Two, in fact.

Internal Conflicts: It Had to Come Up Eventually

In the Thunderstorm Forest Orc Encounter above, the heroes want to continue their trip but they also want to not die, right? And presumably, the orcs want to be fed, but they also want to not die. So, what happens if the fire threatens to overwhelm the orcs if they keep fighting? We

have a new conflict: the orc's desire to kill and eat the party vs. the orc's desire to survive. Likewise, if the heroes are in danger of being overrun, will they give up their desire to continue their journey in favor of survival?

These conflicts are called internal conflicts because they happen entirely inside of some force in the game, either the heroes or some external force. Internal conflicts occur because any given thing might have more than one desire, purpose, motive, or goal and, sometimes, those goals clash. Like the paladin who has to choose between doing the just, lawful thing and kind, merciful, good thing.

When an internal conflict arises, the thing experiencing the conflict has to make a choice. Technically, every time anyone at the table, player or DM, has to make a choice, they are resolving an internal conflict. "Do I attack the orc or heal my friend?" Internal conflict.

You (the DM) should never dabble in the heads of the player-characters. That is to say, players are always free to resolve their own internal conflicts. That is what freedom of choice is about, right? Which isn't to say you should never create sources of internal conflict. When you get skilled, you will learn how powerful it is to plan the seeds of internal conflicts.

I only mention it here to (a) acknowledge that internal conflicts are a thing and (b) to warn you not to become so entrenched in setting up encounters based on sources of conflict that you forget that living, sentient things often want more than one thing at a time. In fact, when I get around to talking about building social interaction encounters, I am going to tell you how vitally important it is to plant internal conflicts in the heads of your NPCs.

For now, just avoid falling into the trap of turning your things into mindless robots that single-mindedly pursue a single motive to the exclusion of all else. Think about the sources of conflict for your sources of conflict.

3: Decision Points - How Even a Good Encounter Can Suck If It Isn't Good

An encounter begins by posing a dramatic question and it ends when the players know the answer to the dramatic question. But the players are prevented from answering the dramatic question until one or more conflicts have been resolved. Got all that? Good. But I lied. We can't talk about decision points yet. We need to talk about the end of encounters first. Because encounters are like fish. If you keep them around for too long past their expiration date, they really start to stink.

Keeping Encounters from Overstaying their Welcome

The dramatic question describes what's at stake in an encounter and why the players care about the encounter. As long as the answer is uncertain, the encounter is tense, exciting, and engaging. So what do you think happens when the answer becomes certain? Did you say "the opposite of tension, excitement, and engagement?" Congratulations, Captain F\$&%ing Obvious.

As a DM, it is your job to recognize when the dramatic question has been answered or when all sources of conflict have been resolved or invalidated so that nothing is preventing the question from being answered. When that happens, the encounter is over. And when the encounter is over, you must end it. No matter what.

Ending the encounter is as easy as removing any remaining sources of conflict and telling the players the answer to the dramatic question. You can use whatever tricks you like. Assume the next hit on any monster kills the monster, allow the monsters to run away, narrate a wrap up (you easily defeat the remaining orc warriors and then you can continue on your way), tell the players they "realize the king is no longer listening and there is probably nothing further they can say to him right now that will change his mind," play the Final Fantasy victory fanfare or that "you lose" tuba music from the Price is Right. It doesn't matter how you do it.

"But what if you end an encounter too early and let the players win (or lose) unfairly, Angry? Shouldn't I run every scene right down to the last, bloody action?" I hear what you are saying. And it sounds like this: "waggghhhh whiney whiney herp derp waaaaahhhhhh." I just spent how many pages telling you that dramatic questions are what make people care about encounters and you're saying you want to run encounters without them? If you want to run boring encounters no one cares about, run the encounters as long as want. Don't let me stop you from running s\$&% games. Idiot. Eventually, the players will realize the encounter is long over and they'll wonder why the hell their time and resources are being wasted on proving it.

It is always better to end an encounter too early and firmly answer the dramatic question than let the encounter drag on past the point of fun. And eventually, you're going to do just that. You're going to end an encounter too early. Usually, you'll do that because your dramatic question does not match the party's dramatic question, which happens sometimes. It happened to me last Saturday.

My heroes got ambushed by some wolves and goblins in a forest and they pretty soundly beat up most of the baddies such that they could continue on their way. So, I sent the

remaining goblin crashing away into the woods, fleeing for its life. And the heroes decided the encounter was not over and gave chase.

Let me tell you what I did not do. I did not say "oh gosh, I must have ended the encounter early. I will continue to run this pointless combat until the players decide they are done." You never, ever let the players drag the encounter on after you decide it is done, even though you might be wrong. The reason why is this: you ended it at the wrong time. That means you did not know what the dramatic question really was. And you never run an encounter without knowing the dramatic question. So, if you keep running an encounter after you admit you had the wrong dramatic question, you will never know when to end it. Never let the players keep an encounter open after you decide it is over.

Instead, when the party's chatter indicated they wanted to chase down the goblin, capture it alive, and interrogate it, I started a new encounter with the question "can the party capture the goblin?" And I assumed the source of conflict was "the goblin is afraid the heroes are going to kill it and wants to escape them." And notice that, if the party could somehow have convinced the goblin that they weren't going to kill it, that would have resolved the conflict. The goblin would have stopped running and they could have captured it.

See? That is the power I have with my understanding of Dramatic Questions and Sources of Conflict and Ending Encounters when they End. It is like having a superpower that let's me waste five hours every week preparing to waste another five hours of every week watching my creating work get trampled by a bunch of ungrateful fools.

The point is: when you think the players should know the answer to the dramatic question, your instincts are almost always right. End the encounter however you have to. Do not let the players keep it open. But, by all means, open new encounters if the players create them.

Decision Points: The Reason We Play This Stupid Game

You know those moments when you look at one of your players and say "what do you do now?" That is a decision point. And decision points are the start of actions. Without decision points, there are no actions. And without actions, there is no RPG.

But the mere presence of decision points is not enough to make an encounter fun and interesting. If a player reaches a decision point and has few or no practical, useful options, the player effectively has no decision point.

For example, imagine a combat in which the wizard has run out of spells. All he has left is a crossbow he isn't very good at shooting. Effectively, the wizard has run out of decision points. Aside from scampering away from monsters and firing off crossbow bolts, the wizard has no choices.

And keep in mind that the player's perception is what is important. If it is the first fight of the day and the party is confronting a small group of kobolds on their way to fight a big dragon, the wizard might have decided to hold back all his big spells. Once he has used up the magic missiles he's allotted to this fight, he's run out of decision points.

When a player is out of decision points, either because there is nothing left to decide or because the number of useful, practical options has become severely limited, that player is about three die rolls from losing interest in the encounter completely. The fun of rolling dice and hoping things work out doesn't last long.

When a player performs the same action multiple times in an encounter, especially if they preface it with a phrase like "I guess I'll do this," or "well, this is all I can do," in their mind, they have run out of decision points.

It is easy to mistake some things for decision points that really aren't. When a player has to react to something with a specific skill or saving throw or defense, that is not an action. The player didn't decide anything. Even if the player gets to choose between one or two defenses or responses, that is still not a decision. It is too limited.

Likewise, when a player is given the choice of whether to continue to do something or stop doing it, that isn't an action. The decision to act was already made. The decision to not stop acting, especially when the action is working, is a non-decision. It isn't an action. That is why those locks that take three lockpicking checks to open are stupid. And why the desert survival encounters and following the tracks encounters fall flat too.

True decision points only occur when something changes. If you could say "the situation is the same, now what do you do," that is not a decision point. Players act in response to stimuli, in response to things that happen in the game world. This will become incredibly important in the next article when I'm going to be showing you how to build encounters.

An encounter can survive one or two heroes running out of decision points for a little while. Not every person at the table will always have something to contribute in every scene, and chasing that particular tail will just run a DM in circles. You need to accept that sometimes one will be bored so the other four can have a great time. That is okay as long as it is a different one every time and everyone gets some fun stuff to do (this will be a big topic in adventure building).

But when the majority of the heroes have run out of decision points, you have three "turns" (combat rounds, passes of die rolling, whatever) to resolve the encounter before it sucks. And once again, we're back in "ending the encounter early" territory. End the damned thing.

The Time Limit and Extending the Encounter

This is a little bit of a digression, but it is worth talking about. First, know this: EVERY encounter has a time limit. That time limit is created by decision points. From the moment you start running the encounter, the encounter hemorrhages decision points until the encounter becomes boring.

Think of it like a game of golf (because I'm so f\$&%ing adept at sports metaphors). Assume the point of every swing of the golf stick (or whatever it is called) is to move your ball closer to what we golfists call "the hole" and to end up in a good spot from which to take your next swing. On the first swing, there are a lot of different places you can aim for that get you closer to the hole that are also good positions to take your next shot from. But as you get closer and closer to the hole, the number of places to aim for gets smaller and smaller until, at last, there is only one useful place to aim for: the hole itself.

All encounters - combats, social interactions, chase scenes, desert navigations - they all work like a game of golf. Once the players settle in, choose a strategy and start making progress, the number of choices starts to dwindle. In combat, people settle into their positions, the number of targets steadily decreases, options are closed off, players are forced to respond to emergencies, and so on, until it comes down to one player making the last attack against the last target.

You can fight this. You can add new things to respond to, new stimuli, new decisions. But that's like trying to stop the tide from going out. Now, once in a while, it is fun to fight the current. But too much of it makes your encounters suck for the same reason that playing golf with someone who hits the ball in random directions and takes twenty swings to get on the green starts to suck. It is overly long, frustrating, and there is no sense that things are ever going to end.

You might have noticed a running theme at this point: end your encounters early instead of letting them become sucky. When the dramatic question is resolved, end the encounter. When the conflicts are over, end the encounter. And when the heroes are out of decision points, end the f\$&%ing encounter.

It is absolutely always better to end an encounter early than it is to let the encounter turn boring.

4: Structures and Scoreboards - Because You CAN Win D&D

An encounter is a series of actions that answer a dramatic question, usually after resolving one or more conflicts. And we've covered dramatic questions, conflicts, and we've talked about decision points as the soil in which the seeds of actions are planted. But I promised four things, and that is only three things. The fourth thing is structure.

In an encounter, you need to know when the dramatic question has been answered (one way or the other) and you need to know when conflicts have been resolved. And when you start adding multiple conflicts and start bringing your sources of conflict into conflicts, you need to keep track of all of that too. When have the heroes sufficiently answered the dramatic question? When can you say, with certainty, the King will not give in to the party's demands? How do you know when the orc's desire to survive outweighs its desire to kill and eat the heroes?

Sometimes it is fairly easy. When the party leaves the spider cave, one way or the other, the conflict is resolved and the dramatic question is answered. When the dragon is dead, the conflict is definitely resolved. But other times, it can be extremely difficult. And that is when some games try to step in and provide a universal framework for resolving encounters, like skill challenges, challenge scenes, progress tracks, and so forth. I won't say these tools aren't useful, but the idea that any universal framework for all encounters could possibly exist is bulls#&\$. And some of them are downright atrocious and focus on entirely the wrong things (counting successes and failures as the measure of progress can f\$&% right off).

You cannot build a single, universal framework for all encounters of every type. And trying to hamfistedly cram encounters into universal frameworks ruins good encounters.

But still, structure is often useful. So, what are you to do?

Well, first of all, ask yourself if you really need a structure in a given encounter (whether you are building it or running it). Can you wing it? And if you aren't sure, give it a try. The only way to get better at improvising is to improvise. Make decisions based on the player's actions and your understanding of the world and the things that live in it. This is where a solid understanding of a consistent world comes in really handy. If you know that orcs would rather die in combat than be branded cowards, you can guess their ferocity will almost always outweigh their survival.

If that doesn't work, try asking yourself if there is any obvious thing that will tell you whether the dramatic question has been answered or whether a conflict has been resolved? If the party is no longer in the spider's cave, the dramatic question has been resolved. Likewise, keep an eye out for the party deciding the encounter is over. If the party snatches the thing and then makes a run for it, and the dramatic question is about whether the party ends up with the thing, it is probably best to wrap up the encounter (especially because "running away from the monsters" is not exactly loaded with decision points). If the party is trying to end an encounter, that's a giveaway that it is over.

Any encounter with a "capture the flag" or "cross the finish line" component is easy enough to judge. When the party has captured the flag or crossed the finish line, don't prolong it. And you really don't need any more structure than just knowing where the flag is or where the finish line is.

But then you have the nebulous encounters like social interactions and combats with complex goals. These are tricky, tricky things. Any structure you impose should almost always be unique to the encounter because every encounter treats different things as important. In fact, part of the art of encounter building is giving the DM running the encounter a good structure or scoreboard (even if that DM is you, the same DM who built the encounter). And, in future articles, I will have a lot to say about structuring encounters.

But if you desperately need a quick, handy structure that you can pull out of your a#&, you can do what I do. Figure out what things are important or what things are in conflict and give them a score from one to ten, but don't start them at one or ten.

The orcs begin with a ferocity of eight and a fear of two. Each time something happens that makes them want to run away or leave, increase the fear score. Each time something happens to make them more dedicated to killing the party, increase the ferocity score. If the fear ever equals the ferocity, the orcs flee.

The party has a head start of seven distance units over the ogre that is chasing them. The ogre, being faster, reduces the distance every round by one. Each thing the party does to slow down or evade the ogre increases the distance by one. When the distance is zero, the ogre catches the party. When the distance is ten, the ogre gets bored and tired and gives up the chase.

It is pretty easy to create measurable "things," stick them on a ten point scale, and just increase or decrease them whenever it seems right. And that sort of "on the fly" encounter structure can help you improvise good encounters.

You can even create new scores in response to player actions. If one of the players successfully intimidates an orc, you can create a "fear" score, push it up, and tell the party "the orc looks around at his allies nervously and their resolve seems to be shaken. They keep the fight up, but it's clear they are losing confidence." That way, the party realizes that you are now keeping score and can take advantage of that, if they want to.

Structure helps, but it is not absolutely necessary in every encounter. It is a tool to help you track progress. Nothing more. And sometimes, it can get in your way and ruin your encounters in an unexpected way.

The Dreaded "I Win" Button

Sometimes, DMs get a little confused about structures and scores. Sometimes, they forget that those things are just tools to help DMs figure out when an encounter is getting close to ending. The only reason monsters have hit points is to help the DM know when the monster is so beat up that it should probably just drop dead. But lots of DMs think hit points are the point of the encounter. You know better.

Eventually, a player is going to attempt an action that, if successful, will resolve all remaining conflicts or answer the dramatic question with certainty. Sometimes, this action won't even require a die roll. The wizard might summon an earth elemental with a monster summoning spell to batter down a wooden door. There really isn't much chance that is going to fail, is there?

But DMs have this knee-jerk response to players trying to press "I win" buttons too early in an encounter. I know they do. I've done several highly unscientific polls on Twitter to prove it. And it is there. And it is completely asinine.

Once again, let's look at golfing. If you are a golfer, and you manage to drive the ball from the starting line to the hole in one swing, we don't complain that you didn't make enough swings. We don't tell you the game was too short. Or boring. We tell you that you did an amazing thing and we give you high fives. I assume golfers get high fives. Everyone likes high fives. We even have a special name for it.

If you are running your game properly, and a player drives the ball off the tee and scores a slam dunk, you have to give them the two-point conversion. If you don't speak sportsball, basically, if your players find a way to win the encounter in a single action, even one without a die roll, they won the encounter. If you can't stomach that, you can't stomach being a DM.

The only reason to deny a properly declared action with the intent of answering a dramatic question that you have determined can succeed is because you are more interested in your "points" and "structures" and "scoreboards" and "hit points" than you are in running a role-playing game.

Never, ever convince yourself that scorekeeping is more important than playing the game.

Running an Encounter Like a Motherf\$&%ing Boss

In all of this drivel about encounters, you might have noticed a distinct lack of any reference to skill checks and initiative rolls or any other mechanical, system-related crap. That's because I already taught you to handle the important parts in Five Simple Rules... and Adjudicating Actions... You Know how to deal with actions. Encounters are just ways of putting actions together in a specific shape. You handle the actions themselves the way you handle all actions: Intention, Approach, Outcomes, Consequences. But now you understand that the Intention is related to answering a Dramatic Question, usually by resolving a particular Conflict. And you know that the Outcomes, therefore, should bring the players closer to answering the Dramatic Question, either in the affirmative or the negative. That concept is important. Remember, the dramatic question tells us why we care about the encounter. So, if an action doesn't move us toward an answer to the dramatic question (positive or negative), we probably don't care about the action. That is what DMs actually mean when they talk about actions that move the story forward. The problem is that most DMs forget that moving toward a negative answer is also moving forward, provided the adventure is built the right way.

The point is, all of this s\$&% works together and builds on one other. An encounter tells you how to start and end an encounter. But the encounter itself is just a container for actions. But actions originate from the players. An action cannot happen unless a player decides on it first. So a DM can't build around actions. We can only build dramatic questions and sources of conflict and make sure there are decision points and some sort of structure or scoreboard.

Now, you can try to plan for actions. You can write pages and pages of contingencies for what to do if the players go here or do that or find this or bluff that or whatever. But what a waste. Building proper encounters using the truly important questions is easier and quicker, and you can adjudicate actions at the table within each encounter to handle pretty much everything.

So, in this framework, how do you run an encounter at the table?

First, you identify the dramatic question. Remember that the dramatic question is a statement of the party's actual objectives at this moment, rephrased as a yes-or-no question.

Next, identify the sources of conflict. Remember, a source of conflict isn't just a thing, it is a reason why the thing will somehow prevent the heroes from answering the dramatic question.

Ask yourself if you need a structure or scoreboard. If you can get by without one, do so. Otherwise, figure out what you need to measure and how to measure it. If all else fails, assign those things a score somewhere between one and ten and figure out what happens when it drops to zero or goes up to ten.

Now, tell the players what is going on. Narrate the opening of the scene. Describe what is happening and mention whatever the thing is that the dramatic question is all about (the far exit, the thing they want to grab, the person who is in danger). Pick out the obvious sources of conflict and describe them as well. I'll do a whole article about describing scenes someday. I promise.

Now, ask the players what they do. Either in initiative order or outside of it, depending on whether you are running a combat or a scene with a series of short, quick actions. Adjudicate each action like you know how to do.

After each action, check to see if the players should now know the answer to the dramatic question and check to see if all of the conflicts have been resolved. If either is the case, narrate the end of the scene and make sure you call attention to the answer to the dramatic question. Otherwise, ask for another action and see where that one takes you.

Keep an eye out for any players who've run out of decision points. Are they repeating the same action over and over again? Are they sounding resigned to certain actions? If so, imagine yourself playing their character and see how many useful, practical options you have. Actions, not just reactions or continuations of ongoing actions. If the player is truly out of options, you've got three die rolls before they are gone from the encounter. And if there are too many players in that state, you'd better start wrapping up the encounter.

And that's it.

Figure Out the Dramatic Question, Sources of Conflict, and Structure; Adjudicate All the Actions, but Watch for the End of the Encounter; then End the Encounter. That is how you run an encounter like a motherfucking boss.

Come back for the next part and I'll tell you how to build awesome encounters.