

The Angry Guide to Kickass Combats (Part 1): How to Pick Your Enemies

by The Angry DM

Don't you hate it when someone promises you a thing and then when they finally deliver, they only deliver half the thing? And they say "I'm sorry, but the thing turned out to be so huge I need to break it up?" And you say "but I wanted the whole thing now!" And they say "well, here's half of it. I'll have the rest for you next week." Yeah. I hate that!

So, it turns out that a blog post on building amazingly good battles is a huge, huge thing. There's a lot to putting together a good fight. And, as I kept writing and writing and writing, I found it was getting more rambling and unfocused. It was all over the place. There's just too much ground to cover.

BATTLEground! Booyah! Sorry. Seriously though. Considering I'm the guy who casually farts out 5,000 words and then says "here's a short little thingy I wrote about the definition of fun, LOL," for me to call it rambling, unfocused, and bloated is saying something.

In other words: I'm sorry but the thing turned out to be so huge, I need to break it up. Here's half of it. I'll have the rest for you next week. Feel free to send me hate mail. I don't read what people send me anyway.

So, we're going to break this s\$&% up. We're going to break it up into two parts because combat design really involves two different things. And I've decided to put the more generally useful thing first. What are the two things? Broadly speaking, I'd like to call them the Numbers Part and the Feels Part, but I'd have to slam my "dice bag" in a desk drawer to punish myself for using the word Feels. So we're going to instead break this down into assembling groups of foes and building a battlefield around them. WHAT and WHO are you fighting and WHERE and HOW are you fighting? Got it?

But (and this is a big BUT), I don't want to imply there's a step-by-step process. It doesn't work that way. Encounter building, adventure building, and even campaign building, all function in these weird sort of feedback loops. And that's probably a good place to start discussing this whole mess called combat design.

Feedback: How DMing is Like Your Endocrine System

Let's talk about hormones, the tiny crazy chemicals that run all around your body making everything happen. Yeah, I s\$&% you not. Hormones. Because my fans have made it clear that I am not nearly as good at sports metaphors as I think I am. And I figure the best way to give them the finger is to say "okay, fine, no more sports, now we do biochemistry, f\$&%ers!" So hormones.

See, the important thing to understand is that you have all these weird chemicals that just get dumped into your system that make your body do different things. And they all sort of work against each other. If there is too much sugar in your blood, you start shooting out this chemical called insulin that gets rid of it. But then, when the sugar level gets too low, your body starts releasing another chemical called glucagon to release more sugar into your blood. And when it gets too high again, in comes more insulin. And thus your body maintains its sugar levels through feedback.

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And that's sort of how building adventures works. Kind of. See, maybe you decide to run an adventure in a goblin cave, right? So you decide the first encounter is a goblin guard post. And as you start building that encounter, you realize you need something to help the monsters pin down the PCs. So you throw in some giant spiders that the goblins have tamed. But now, you've got goblins with spider pets in one encounter. Shouldn't there be spiders in the rest of the adventure? Of course. So, you add a breeding pit filled with baby spider swarms where the goblins raise the giant spiders. Which changes your map. And the story of the goblin tribe. So you write the story and decide the goblins are weird spider worshippers. And then you realize that you have a storyline planned around drow in two weeks, so maybe the goblin tribe worships Lolth. So now you throw in a goblin priestess of Lolth who is secretly in power but lets the hobgoblin warlord think he's running the show. And this s\$&% all starts to feed into each other. Feedback loops. Just like the feedback loop I don't have which means I'm not allowed to have a giant-ass piece of f\$&%ing cake whenever I want. Thanks diabetes!

Ummm... I may have lost my focus.

Feedback loops. As a DM, you've got to learn to be sort of bifocal. Or multifocal. You're never JUST working on an encounter, you're never JUST designing an adventure. You always have to be willing to zoom in and look at how a campaign decision affects an encounter or adventure and vice versa. It all feeds into itself.

AND... you've got to learn be bifocal when it comes to building teams of baddies and building battlefields for them to defend. Sometimes you start with the battlefield and then populate it. Sometimes you start with the population and build the battlefield. But always always always be willing to change one to suit the other. Flip back and forth and let the decisions on one side feed the decisions on the other.

A Quick Note on Examples

I'm going to draw my example monsters from D&D 5th Edition because that's the edition I'm currently focussing on and because my Pathfinder Bestiary is out in the car and I don't want to put pants on. Now, I know the WotC fools decided to make us wait six f\$&%ing weeks after the release of the game to put out the Monster Manual, and, at time of writing, it isn't out. And no, WotC didn't think I was part of their extra special friends club deserving of an advance copy even though I'm writing thousands of f\$&%ing words every goddamned week telling people how to run their stupid game because they don't seem to be able to explain it based on the comments I've received. And no, I'm not bitter at all.

But I digress. I'm going to be using the monsters available in the D&D 5E DM's Basic Rules which you can download here. I won't publish the stats here because even though WotC still hasn't worked out who is allowed to write what for their stupid game, I'm pretty sure their legal department will have an answer for me if I try and it will rhyme with "drop your pants and bend over."

Lies the DMG Told Me

Okay, so this article is going to strictly be about putting groups of monsters together. About deciding who or what is on the battlefield. It's the part of combat design that most people know about. In fact, most people think that's all there is to combat design. Just drop some beasties in a room and be done

with it. But it isn't. And even if it were the be-all and end-all of combat design, most people can't even get that part right. That's why it deserves a whole f\$&%ing article. Because people are dumb.

Let's start with the math. Most instructions for building combats start with a table filled with things like challenge ratings and encounter levels and XP budgets and math math math math math. They tell you that if you put X number of creatures of level Y into a room, they will provide a challenge of Z difficulty for a party of A heroes of B levels. And then they go on to say the adventuring day should have N encounters of Z difficulty. And you know what? That's actually a gigantic pile of stinking horses\$&%. There is nothing in there that is actually true.

Imagine five goblin archers. Got it? Good. Now put them in the middle of a thirty-foot square room. Now, imagine a party of five standard PCs walk in the door, of some appropriate level. How does that fight play out?

Now take the same goblins and stick them a football field away from the party across an open meadow. The goblins are on a hill, concealed in a copse of trees. The PCs are out in the open. Same goblins. Same PCs. Same numbers. Now how does that fight play out?

Kind of different, huh? You bet your a\$& it is.

The thing is, there are a lot of factors that determine the "difficulty" of an encounter. Pair up hobgoblins and wolves for example. That's a pretty damned effective team up. Now pair up a bear and a bugbear. Not quite as effective. No synergy. Still dangerous, sure. But not AS dangerous as it could be.

But the makeup of the monster team and the terrain are not the only factors affecting the difficulty of the encounter. The players and the DM have a lot to say about how tough a fight is. Some players are very skilled at building extremely effective characters while other players are not. Some players have excellent tactical acumen while others do not. Same goes for DMs. I spent weeks and weeks absolutely wrecking a group of PCs in D&D 4E because I was very good at building synergies and using strategies even in average difficulty encounters and the players were... let's just say it was Napoleon Bonaparte vs. Napoleon Dynamite.

Eventually, I realized there's no sport in bludgeoning someone whose spirit is already broken and I dialed it back. See, when the game says "this is an average encounter" that means that the encounter is probably average for between 50% and 65% of game groups. The other 35% to 50% of groups are going to find it too easy or too hard. Fortunately, the game gives you an easy difficulty slider. You can just adjust the challenge rating or encounter level or XP budget or whatever. It's all the same. Unfortunately, the rules don't really bother explaining that they aren't an absolute goddamned immutable formula. They are a f\$&%ing knob you can twist. And as you get to know your players, you should be constantly twisting their knobs. Twist your players' knobs.

I bring this up because your combats - when I'm done with you - will be much better. They will fit together better, they will run better, they will be more exciting, and they will be more tense. They will also be more dangerous. More deadly. And you might find your players struggle a bit to keep up. So be willing to dial the difficulty down. Now, you could dial the difficulty down by designing s\$&%ier combats, by making poor use of tactics, by putting together crappy groups of foes. You could do that. And sometimes you will. That's cool. That is a neat way to adjust the difficulty. But you don't want to do that

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all the time. You don't want s&t combats. Your baseline average combats should be fun, exciting, and tense. They should run better. You just want your players to have a chance of surviving them.

Look: the combat building math is a good baseline, but don't be a slave to it. Be willing to go a little above it, especially if your players show they can handle it. More importantly, be willing to go below it. I know it seems kind of silly to suggest you throw a fight at the PCs that they can trounce easily with few lost resources. But if you put it together well, it still be fun to play and it let's the players feel cool and powerful. Someday, when I'm done talking about encounter building and we start talking about how to build adventures, I'll give you a bunch of other reasons why you might want to use weak encounters every so often. Point is, do not be a slave to the combat building math.

Variety is the Spice of Getting Your Ass Kicked

Before we start analyzing individual monsters, let's take just a moment to go over some basic ideas about what makes a good group of monsters. If you're going to build a combat, what are your general goals for that team.

The biggest, most important, most useful piece of advice I can give you is that numbers and variety are your two best friends. Let's talk first about numbers.

One monster, no matter how cool WotC tries to convince you it is with solo rules or lair actions or whatever the f&t the special adjustment du jour is; one monster isn't as cool as several. The fact that WotC has to keep inventing new ways to make solo monsters cool is kind of a giveaway. Solo monsters fail for a lot of reasons. Now, I realize I don't have the Monster Manual in front of me (those jerks) and maybe the 5E MM will change my mind, but I'm not hopeful. Because lone monsters suffer from pacing problems, they can't hack it in the action economy, they don't provide progress indicators, and they are rarely dynamic because they are too easy to pin down. What does all that bulls&t mean?

Pacing (in this case) refers to the fact that turns flip back and forth between the players and the DM. If all the players go, then the monster goes, there's no back and forth, no ebb and flow. And that's inherently less exciting. In addition, nothing changes in the fight. See, when you're fighting a group of monsters, each kill changes the monsters' options. They lose the actions and abilities that monster had. Which means the players can make interesting decisions about which threats to eliminate first and which ones to neutralize after. You just don't have those interesting decisions and changes to the fight with a solo baddie.

That's also what I mean by progress indicators. Because nothing changes as the PCs win against solo monsters, there is no sense of gradual progress. There is just a series of identical rounds until the monster is dead and nothing major to celebrate until that point.

The action economy refers to how many things the bad guys can do as compared to the PCs. Solo bad guys, even with two full action sets AND a lair action available every turn are still functioning only 60% of the time compared to a five-person party. And the fact the party can surround and outmaneuver a single foe easily means the fight tends to stay in one place. Especially when the party is reasonably skilled at controlling movement through opportunity attacks or actions that slow or restrain creatures.

The point is, the ideal fight has about as many monsters as it has PCs. And it includes multiple different types of monsters. Thus, the fight remains dynamic and creates interesting decisions. Now, not every fight has to be five monsters of two or three different types. It's good to mix it up. But most of your fights should lean toward having at least two different types of creatures and more than two creatures total in the bad guy group.

It's possible to go overboard, though. Outnumbering the party by a huge degree or having five different monsters in a five monster group will drive you crazy. That's a lot to keep track of. Sure, once in a while, a fight against five unique NPCs (the standard enemy adventuring party) is fun. But it's also a lot of bookkeeping.

Beyond numbers and variety, understand that the amount of synergy between the monsters in terms of their goals, strategies, and tactics is going to affect the feel and difficulty of the fight. But not in the sense that it is always strictly better to have a lot of a synergy. Sometimes, having no synergy at all makes for a more fun fight. But the... whoops. Wait wait wait.

I just realized I used some words that people think they know but almost always have wrong. So, put that synergy thing on the back burner for a moment so we can talk about what makes really gives a monster its identity.

Goals, Strategies, and Tactics: What a Monster Really Is

As I noted about 2,500 words ago, building a battle comes down to two things. Choosing the foes and designing the battlefield. And considering I claimed this whole article is about choosing foes, I've been kind of beating around the bush, haven't I. I've talked about challenge rating numbers and filling out the enemy force with numbers and variety, but I haven't told you how to actually populate a battle. How do you choose bad guys?

To really get to the heart of it, you have to understand what you're ACTUALLY choosing when you decide that a monster goes on your roster. What is a monster? At its heart, a monster is just a stat block. A pile of mechanics right? I mean, if you want to get technical, it's just some numbers and a couple of attacks and special abilities. Right?

But those mechanics aren't just mechanics. Those mechanics are actually tactics. And tactics add up to strategies. And strategies guide a creatures toward goals. And you've got to understand what those three words mean. In detail. And most people don't. Especially strategy and tactics. People think those words are interchangeable.

Monster Goals: The "I" and the "Team"

Let's start with goals. Goals are the things that the bad guys want to accomplish. And you've got to know what they are. Goals are partially defined by the monster itself and they are partially designed by the ENCOUNTER you're building. Remember all that bulls\$&% about sources of conflict and why the monsters are fighting? Yeah, that is where you define the monster goals.

Let's start with a hobgoblin guard post, as an example. There's a cave where a warband of hobgoblins have been hiding out (along with their pets and slaves). In the entry cave, which is protected by a stout

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door or gate, there's a guard post. When the hobgoblins get attacked by adventurers, what are their goals? Well, you could say the goal is to kill the adventurers, but that really isn't it. I mean, sure, that'd be neat. But the guards at the gate are more interested in (a) raising an alarm and (b) holding the gate as long as possible to give the people inside time to reinforce them or prepare or evacuate or whatever. Right? The hobgoblins' goals are really to raise an alarm and delay the heroes. This is defined by their role in the adventure (guards) and by their nature (hobgoblins are lawful, organized, and militaristic).

But things get complicated quickly because individual monsters may have different goals even when they are working together.

So, suppose the hobgoblins also have some goblin archers at the guard post. In theory, the goal of the monster team is to (a) raise an alarm and (b) hold the gate as long as possible. And the hobgoblins, by their nature, will die for those goals. But goblins are cowardly and selfish. They might add (c) while staying well out of harm's way.

So the first thing you need to understand for every creature that you put into an encounter is what its goals are in that encounter, as well as what the team's goals are.

For another example, let's consider ghouls. Ghouls are nasty undead monsters. They desire nothing more than to feed on the living. They are basically just depraved undead predators. So, when a pack of ghouls descends on a group of heroes, their goal is to eat the heroes. Just like any animal. But there's more to it than that. See, individual ghouls don't really care about other ghouls. Empathy is not high on their list of qualities. So, each individual ghoul is really only concerned for itself. If a ghoul manages to drop a hero, that ghoul would love to just drag the hapless victim away and eat it. And if the other heroes are distracted with other ghouls, that is precisely what it will do. So each ghoul's individual goal is to drag away and eat a hero.

See how easy this is?

You just have to understand what the monsters ACTUALLY want as a team and then see how individual monsters see the team goal. You've got to know both.

Monster Tactics: What Do They Do?

On the other end of the spectrum from goals, if there is a spectrum, which there is because I'm telling you there is and it's high time you just start believing me when I say things because I am always right... On the other end of the spectrum from goals are tactics. And this is where people's understanding of words gets woefully, dangerously fuzzy.

Tactics are the individual, moment-by-moment decisions a creature makes. When a hobgoblin chooses to stay in lockstep with his fellows and drop into full defense, forming a shield wall around the gate? That's a tactic. When the goblin archer decides to try and perforate the enemy wizard? That's a tactic. When a ghoul decides to leap on the ranger and use his claws rather than his bite? That's a tactic. Tactics are basically the answer when the question is "what do you do this round?"

Most tactics are spelled out by the rules and by the monster stat block. Those define what decisions the monster can make. Of course, the only real limit on tactics is the creativity of the DM. There is nothing

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that prevents an enemy swashbuckler from swinging from a chandelier and trying to kick the fighter over the balcony. PCs can do it. So can monsters.

So, those are tactics: individual moment-by-moment decisions the bad guys make. But tactics and goals are very broadly separated. And you need something to bridge the two.

Monster Strategies: Team Positions and Other Sports Metaphors

Now, I can't think of a good biochemistry example for this one, so I'm going to go back to sports metaphors. Let's talk about hockey.

Collectively, everybody on a hockey team agrees that they want to win the game by scoring more goal than the other hockey team. And each member of the team has a whole pile of tactical possibilities. They can take shots on goal, they can pass, they can try to steal the puck, they can block shots on goal, they can body check opposing team members, and so on and so on and so on. But if all the hockey team members went out and did all of those things, the game would be chaos. Not to mention the fact that some hockey players are better at some of those things than others. And that is why different players have different positions on the team. It defines how they can best contribute to the team's goal and helps them focus on making the best tactical decisions. When a defenseman manages to steal the puck from the opposing team, he doesn't take a shot on goal, he passes the puck up to a wingman or to the center.

And that's what a strategy is. A strategy is an overall plan. It's an idea of how the team is going to work toward their goal. And, more importantly, how each member of the team is going to help accomplish the goal.

And THAT is what you are really choosing when you assign monsters to the team. You are choosing strategies.

For example, when I decide to plant hobgoblins and goblins at the gate, I look at those stat blocks and try to figure out what the monster is capable of. How can it best achieve the combat goals. Let's look at the hobgoblin for an example of how you do this.

The hobgoblin is notable because it has a reasonably high armor class and decent hit points for its level. It can take a beating. It is also notable because it deals extra damage when it is close to allies. It can also deal extra damage by lowering its' defenses because it can use its longsword with two hands by discarding its shield. And finally, it has a longbow, allowing it to attack at range by again lowering its defenses. That is the set of tactics that are unique to hobgoblins.

But what strategy will the hobgoblin take? Remember that the point is not to kill all the PCs (though if that's possible, great). The point is to slow the PCs. To delay them. To keep them from breaching the gate. Their defensive capabilities are what's most important. However, their ability to stand close together and deal extra damage shouldn't be ignored either. Ideally, the hobgoblins will want to form a defensive wall, hold their position, and kill the PCs as they try to breach the line. They won't break out their bows (unless the PCs stay far away) and they won't switch to two-handed long swords (because they need defense and staying power). That's their strategy.

Of course, notice that the hobgoblins do have lots of possible strategies. For example, a team of archer hobgoblins behind the main line will simply rain down arrows from a defensive position and pick off the heroes who don't engage the main line in melee combat. Or a second group of melee hobgoblins can flank the heroes after they crash into the hobgoblins' shield wall. Those second hobgoblins, the flankers, will use their long swords two-handed to cut down the foes as quickly as possible with increased damage.

Now, what about goblins? Goblins are defensively weak compared to hobgoblins. Their AC is lower and their hit points are lower. They also both ranged and melee attacks which are equally as powerful, but ranged attacks are usually better than melee attacks because they can target anyone, not just foes in smacking range. They also have the Nimble Escape ability that let's them easily get out of harm's way or disappear altogether. And that's handy. Because remember, although the goblin is inclined to help the hobgoblins hold the gate as long as possible, they are also concerned with their own survival. So they want to stay far away from danger and under cover. And if things turn bad, they will want to flee.

So clearly, the goblins will keep themselves far from heroes and out of harm's way, peppering foes the hobgoblins can't engage with arrows. If the goblins do end up in melee, they are going to disengage and run around the battlefield, staying away from melee heroes, even if it means not attacking. That suits their goal for two reasons. First, it means the goblin is fleeing from harm (its goal) and second it means the melee heroes are wasting time chasing goblins around like some Benny Hill Goes to Moria holiday special, dragging out the fight.

What about the ghouls and their strategies? Well, ghouls are fairly standard melee monsters with two fighting options. They can bite and they can claw. The bite does more damage but the claw can paralyze foes. And that paralysis is where the ghouls strategy shines. See, each time a ghouls attacks, there is a chance it is going to completely disable someone for a round or more. And remember each ghouls strategy is going to grab a tasty adventurer and drag him away. So the individual ghouls are going to try to spread themselves out among the individual heroes. Once a ghouls disables a hero, either by bringing it to zero hit points or paralyzing it, that ghouls is going to look around the situation and make a choice. If all the other heroes are distracted and it can get away, the ghouls is going to drag that PC off the battlefield and start killing it. Otherwise, if there is an unengaged target, the ghouls is going to run over to it and try to disable it. One way or another, though, the ghouls are going to be spreading themselves out.

Compare them to wolves. Wolves are also basically just predators. But they are going to behave in a very different way. Notice that wolves, when they work together, can pull opponents down to the ground. And once an opponent is grounded, the wolves have advantage on attacks while the opponent has disadvantage. For strategies, the wolves are better off focusing their attention on as few opponents as possible, swarming PCs one at a time, taking them down and then savaging them on the ground. Even though wolves and ghouls have very similar goals, their individual tactical options lend themselves to very different strategies.

For that matter, as you start building encounters, you might also notice some strategic synergies. For example, wolves and hobgoblins have some very similar strategic possibilities. If you have a group of hobgoblins and wolves, they make nasty double teams against melee combatants. Knocking them prone, gaining advantage, and dealing bonus damage, all for staying close together.

So, as you start building teams of enemies to fight the PCs, you need to know what the creatures' goals are and what overall strategies are best to accomplish those goals.

When Things Change

Now, this is more a matter of RUNNING battles than BUILDING battles, but understand that goals and strategies are big-picture things. They are a part of the design. But things change. For example, imagine the hobgoblins at the guard post discover that the PCs brought along a wizard with numerous area effect spells that are wrecking them. They might discard the shield wall strategy as a result, but they are going to adopt a new strategy that still suits them. Maybe they break into smaller teams of two and spread out, fighting individual PCs. Maybe some of them leave the shield wall and take out their bows to eliminate the wizard while the others try to endure the onslaught.

And sometimes the goal of the fight has to be abandoned. At a certain point, for instance, the hobgoblins and goblins might realize that the guard post is lost. The goblins may decide to flee. The hobgoblins might decide to die holding the guard post until the last possible moment to give their next line of defense that many more seconds. Or some of the hobgoblins might break off to join the second line of defense, while a few try to buy them time to retreat. Or the hobgoblins might make a fighting withdrawal into their lair, drawing the heroes with them into the next line of defense. Or maybe reinforcements join the gate guards. And with the increased numbers, the hobgoblins go on a more offensive strategy.

And see? This is also where encounter design and adventure design get into that feedback loop. Because, obviously, when you're designing this encounter, you also need to design the next line of defense and you have to decide how much worse that defense gets after the alarm has been raised and the PCs waste more time trying to breach the gate.

Putting it Altogether

In the end, there are a LOT of factors to consider when populating the battlefield with bad guys. And that's really what this article, this half of combat design is about. How to cull a gigantic book like the Monster Manual down and build compelling encounters with it. What do you really need to understand to push your players to the limit. I'm going to try and summarize the key points now. Sort of a takeaway thing. But, remember, this is only half the story. The other half is the battle itself. We're covering WHO is fighting and WHY they are fighting right now (with a little nod to HOW they are fighting). But we also have to figure out WHERE they are fighting and a few other HOWs as well.

And you can't do the WHO/WHAT and WHERE/HOW steps in isolation. They are going to feed each other, as you'll see next week. But meanwhile, I've already given you enough to start putting together compelling teams of bad guys. So you can get started.

Takeaway Number 1: Build an Encounter, Then Build a Combat

You have to know why the fight is happening, what the PCs want, and what the monsters want. I already pretty much built you an awesome hobgoblin guard post, but you'll notice there was more to it than just putting X hobgoblins and Y goblins in the guard post. It all st

Takeaway Number 2: Add More Monsters and More Variety Whenever Possible

Multiple creatures are always more compelling than solo monsters. Variety is usually more compelling than groups of identical monsters. Also, don't group initiative up if you can avoid it. If f\$&%s up the pacing.

Takeaway Number 3: Encounter Budgets are an Okay Start, But Futz and Fiddle

All of the rules for encounter building will only get you in the ballpark. They aren't always accurate. There is nothing wrong with weaker fights. Nothing wrong with stronger fights. There's more to difficulty than the numbers. Pay them only loose attention.

Takeaway Number 4: Think in Terms of Goals, Strategy, and Tactics

When you add a monster to a fight, you're not just adding a stat block. That monster has to be able to contribute to the fight in some way and it may even bring its own goals to the fight. Figure out what the monster's best strategy is going to be and what position it's going to fill on the team. And by the way, if you're still running D&D 4E, roles aren't good enough. You need to dig deeper. Analyze the s\$&% out of your monsters. And read the Monster Manual (or whatever you've got) with an eye toward strategies, goals, and tactics. What can the monster do? How does it behave? And how do those two things inform the way it is going to fight?

Takeaway Number 5: Everything Feeds Everything Else

When you're building encounters, you need to have an eye on the adventure and on the campaign. When you're futzing with mechanics, you need to have the story in the back of your mind. And when you design adventures, you need to think about the individual encounters that will make it up. And when you're imagining and running the story, you need to have an eye on the mechanics. Everything feeds everything.

Takeaway Number 6: The Best Advice and the Best Raincoats are Reversible

Now, this something I didn't spell out, but I'm going to tell you now because it is going to come up later: everything I said here, you can turn it around. If you want to make a fight harder, for example, you can make sure the monster strategies synergize well. But if you want to make the fight easier, you can combine strategies that don't work well together. Or you can put monsters in situations where they aren't able to play to their strengths. You can put hobgoblins in a situation where they are scattered and have to rely on archery rather than allies and melee and teamwork for example.

Bonus Section: A Super Secret Angry Adventure/Encounter Design Tip

I'm going to leave you with one little bonus piece of advice that is technically part of adventure building. When I start designing an adventure, especially a site-based adventure, I like to go through and make a short list of game elements that may or may not work well together, but that suit the adventure for some reason. Maybe five things at most. So, in my hobgoblin outpost, I might list hobgoblins, goblins, wolves, elevated wooden scaffoldings, and spiked wooden barricades. That's my starting list of elements to combine together in different ways. As I then build individual encounters, I draw from that list first, combining two or three different elements at a time. When I discover something new to add to the

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game while building an encounter, I also add it to the list. So, if I have a cave that is cut by an underground river with a narrow wooden bridge, I might add “underground rivers and bridges” to my list. That helps bring your adventure together.

And it doesn't have to be purely a site-based adventure for it to work. If the PCs are going up against an evil organization, like a cult or assassins guild, come up with a roster of baddies and situations and game elements to associate specifically with that organization. It helps tie things together, thematically. And it makes it easier to build encounters.

Because, as you will see next week, all of those little game elements are not everything there is to combat design. In point of fact, you can fill an entire ten encounter dungeon using only three to five game elements and still have every encounter feel fresh, exciting, and interesting.

If you know what you're doing.

And you will.