

## Three Shocking Things You Won't Believe About D&D Combat!

By The Angry DM

Let's not waste a lot of time with long-winded, rambling introductions. I've written about handling actions, running basic encounters, building basic encounters, and social interaction. So, it's time to wade into a topic very near and dear to the shriveled blackened chest-nugget that passes for my heart: combat encounters. As it sort of standard for me, I'm going to break this down into two parts. The first part is all the bulls\*\*\* conceptual garbage that will equip you to RUN better combats. The second part is the nitty gritty, hands on, grease monkey stuff about BUILDING better combats.

Now Part 1, that's this article, is going to be a little bit different. Instead of teaching you a bunch of neat s\*\*\* to help you run better combats, I'm going to take a drill sergeant approach. No, I don't mean I'm going to scream insults at you because that helps you learn (I do that in ALL of my articles). I mean that I'm going to be breaking down a lot of stuff you THINK you know. Because you're wrong, maggot. You don't know jack about s\*\*\* when it comes to combat. See how this works? Good, now drop and give me twenty.

Also, two disclaimers...

Disclaimer Numero Uno: I'm going to say a lot of unkind things about combat encounters. Partly for hyperbolic shock value (like I do), but mostly because the things I am going to say are true and I am force for truth and goodness, dammit, and I will beat anyone unconscious if they say otherwise. But you might walk away thinking I hate combat. And that would be a damned dirty lie. I LOVE combat. I love fight scenes. I love action. I love grids and minis and tactics and strategies and all that stuff. That's why I play D&D. That's why I stuck out D&D 4E so long - it had a great f\*\*\*ing combat engine. I love combat. But if you want to run combat well, you can't have any illusions. I mean, it's okay to love chocolate-covered bacon, but you can't pretend that s\*\*\* won't kill you. So, don't assume I hate combat just because I'm going to be mean and nasty to it.

Also, I don't hate narrative combat. Just as a side note. If you want to run less tactically precise fights without a grid or cool cinematic battles without minis and counting squares, everything I'm going to say still holds true. I run fights like that too. But so help me, if you call it "theater of the mind" combat, I will beat you to death with a copy of John Green's "The Fault in Our Stars." I hate that pretentious bulls\*\*\* phrase.

Disclaimer Numero Dos: At some point, a few paragraphs from now, I'm going to recommend a game that is of the sort that I am generally very down about. It is, in some ways, one of those bulls\*\*\* story-gamey narrative player agency wankfests. But, if you get past that, it is actually a brilliant minimalist deconstruction of ALL role-playing games. Now, I'm not going soft. I'm not going to run campaigns in it or anything like that. Watchmen was a interesting movie to see, but it isn't the be-all and end-all of superhero movies. So, don't think you're losing to me all the Fate and Numanuma and Fiasco and Dread bulls\*\*\* and I'm eventually going to tell you all to play Amber Diceless RPG without a GM. Just trust me, okay?

Now, disclaimers done. Long-a& intro averted. On with the article.

## **Angry's Three Shocking Facts About Combat Encounters**

Everything I'm about to tell you, everything you need to know to run less worse combat encounters, everything in this article and the next one; it is all predicated on three important facts. And you'd better prepare yourself because these facts are going to shock the f&% out of you. I suggest you remove both your hat and your socks because either or both may potentially be blown off and cause serious injury. Ready?

Shocking Combat Encounter Fact 1: There is no such thing as a combat encounter.

Shocking Combat Encounter Fact 2: Even if there were such a thing as a combat encounter, rules for combat encounters are completely unnecessary.

Shocking Combat Encounter Fact 3: Even if there were such a thing as a combat encounter and even if the rules for combat encounters were actually necessary, you should avoid using them whenever possible.

Okay, calm down. Remember what I said in the first disclaimer. I love combat, I love tactical combat, I'm not ruining your game. Relax. Breathe for a moment. Then read on and we'll break it down.

### **There's No Such Thing as a Combat Encounter**

If you've read my previous articles about encounters, you actually already know that there's no such thing as a combat encounter. You just don't realize that you know it. The reason lies in the definition of an encounter which I spelled out in [Four Things You've Never Heard of That Make Encounters Not Suck](http://angrydm.com/2013/05/four-things-youve-never-heard-of-that-make-encounters-not-suck). (<http://angrydm.com/2013/05/four-things-youve-never-heard-of-that-make-encounters-not-suck>). In that article, I explained that an encounter was a scene in the game that begins with the posing of a dramatic question (basically a goal), that ends when that question is answered (the players either achieve their goal or fail to), and that contains one or more sources of conflict that lie between the players and their goals. Go read that article if you haven't. Otherwise nothing else here is going to make sense.

But what is a combat? It's a fight, right? A battle, a fracas, a skirmish, a melee, a brouhaha, right? But what really is it? Well, a combat is a form of conflict resolution utilizing violence. Force. Do you see the problem?

A combat is not an encounter. An encounter has a goal, and an end point, and contains one or more sources of conflict. Combat is conflict resolution. It happens when the players actually play out the encounter and either the PCs or the monsters (or both) resort to violence to resolve the conflict. There's no such thing as a combat encounter because a combat is NOT a complete encounter. It's missing s&%. Utterly necessary s&%. And I actually hinted at this back in that article when I pointed out that many DMs and published adventures don't spend any time figuring out WHY a battle is happening and WHAT both sides want out of it. So it defaults to a murderfest. Two sides end up in the same place and just slaughter each other.

And there are at least two problems with thinking about combat as an encounter, rather than as something that happens within an encounter. First, it means you (the DM) are not open to non-combat

solutions the players might propose. If you design a combat encounter, there is, sure as hell, gonna be a fight. The players can try to negotiate or flee or sneak past or surrender or bluff, but damn it, you presented a combat and a combat it will be. In fact, most DMs open combats unambiguously with an act of hostility. "The goblins snatch up their weapons, scream a battle cry, and charge! Roll initiative." And the thing is, you could step back one moment in time and give the players a chance to forestall that charge easily enough. "The goblins see your approach and begin moving to grab their weapons, what do you do?" That extra moment tells the players "hey, you have a second to keep this from turning into a fight if you want to."

The second problem is that, when you think of combat as the encounter, you're unwilling to end the encounter until the combat itself ends. Again, in Four Things, I mentioned the danger of letting an encounter drag on too long. Truth is, an encounter might actually be over before the combat ends and that "mop up phase" where people are no longer willing to spend resources because they've already won or accomplished their goal, that gets boring. And even if the encounter, the conflict, can't end until everything on one side is dead (zombies don't tend to surrender or run away, for example), that doesn't mean the encounter can't end. "You dispatch the remaining two zombies with haste and move on." Those pointless wasted rounds you save, they can add up to an extra exciting encounter every session.

The point is that once you recognize that combats are not encounters, but instead are just one way that conflicts within encounters get resolved, you give your players more freedom and you empower yourself to cut out boring s&f from your game. And that's just the start. But we'll come back to that. Because now, let's move on to the next shocking fact.

### **Combat Rules are Unnecessary**

Let's talk, for a moment, about the chapter in every f&f RPG called "Combat." Actually, let's talk about one RPG from which that chapter is conspicuously absent (and remember the second disclaimer, because here it is). Let's talk about Dungeon World.

If you haven't played or run Dungeon World by Sage LaTorra and Adam Koebel (<http://www.dungeon-world.com/>) you really need to at least once. The game itself is pretty bog standard in terms of the stories it tells. You've got your standard D&D classes having standard D&D adventures in a standard D&D setting. You know the type. But the game is a brilliant study in how RPGs are put together on the fundamental level. In fact, the core mechanic of every RPG that every RPG just assumes players and GMs can handle (present a situation, player decides how to respond, resolve action, repeat) is firmly encoded in the system in a way that makes it completely impossible to f&f up. Likewise, the basic rules of when to roll dice (when failure and success are both possible and when the outcome will actually mean something) are also hard-coded into the system. If you polished up the presentation of Dungeon World, you would have a perfect tool to teach new GMs how to run any RPG. I firmly believe that running a few sessions of Dungeon World will make you a better GM at whatever your go-to game happens to be.

But what's most interesting is what's missing from Dungeon World: the combat chapter. And that's the part I want to talk about.

So, what do you generally have in that stupid combat chapter? We have rules for taking turns, we have an action economy, we often get rules for how to resolve attacks, and we have rules for handling injuries and death. Right? That's combat. But what's interesting is that by calling out combat in its own

chapter and by spelling out those things that apply only to combats, you create what I like to call the Combat Swoosh Problem.

Did you ever play one of those Japanese role-playing video games like Final Fantasy or Dragon Warrior/Quest? Remember how you're walking along and suddenly the screen flashes and whooshes and you're in a different screen and facing a bunch of monsters and now you're playing a different game? You're playing a turn-based battle. Contrast that with something like the Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim. In that game, there's no delineation between combat and not-combat. Your character can swing a sword, do a dragon scream, cast a spell, drink a potion, or eat a cheese wedge anytime. The rules don't change just because you're in a fight. And you can start a fight anytime just by whacking someone with your sword or blasting them with a fireball.

Rolling initiative is the Combat Swoosh of D&D. It signals that now we're playing a different game and everything works differently.

EXCEPT IT F\$&%ING DOESN'T! THAT'S A LIE!

And Dungeon World proves that. Dungeon World doesn't have initiative. It doesn't have a special action economy. Nothing changes when a fight breaks out. And when you run Dungeon World for someone who was raised on D&D, it blows their f\$&%ing mind. It's fantastic.

How does that work?

Think back to any other scene in the game that isn't a combat. Let's say the PCs pick up the gold idol and suddenly the temple rumbles and starts to collapse. "What do you do," the DM says urgently. "I'll hold my shield over my head and flee for the exit," yells Alice, playing the fighter. "Okay," says the DM, "you make it to the doorway. What about you Bob?" "I flee after Alice, but I don't have anything to protect me." "Uh oh, make a Reflex save!" "Fourteen." "You get clonked on the head, take five damage and end up sprawled on the floor." Carol says, "I'll dash over to Bob and get an arm around him and help him flee for the exit. My shield spell is still working. Hopefully it will protect us." And so on.

Now, compare that to scene where the players enter a room and there's nothing immediately threatening. The DM describes the room and then what happens? Alice say something like "I'm going to move toward the open doorway on the far side and watch out for trouble." Then Bob says "I'm going to examine the treasure chest. I think it might be trapped." And Carol says "I'm going to check out that statue. Do I recognize the runes?" And the DM responds with "Alice, you don't see anything coming, but you stand at the ready. Give me a Perception check. Bob, you search the chest. Give me a Search check. Carol, you don't recognize the runes."

Notice how, in both of those scenes, the game settles into a natural rhythm. There's no explicit turn order and no defined action economy, but those things are still happening. The DM manages the pace of the scene and everyone bounces from decision point to decision point, which establishes a sort of action economy. You can do a thing. Then we'll resolve it. And you or someone else can do a thing afterwards.

Dungeon World simply says "that's how the game flows, we don't need to impose anything special on the game just because there is a fight." And it doesn't. And it works just fine. Now, the structure of the game itself helps the GM set the appropriate pace, but a skilled GM wouldn't even need that.

And I kid you not, you could totally run a D&D combat without bothering to roll for initiative. The first person who wants to act, let them act. Then, bounce the action to a bad guy. Maybe the bad guy the PC attacked. Or another PC instead. Shotgun the actions around, and just keep it up. Hell, you can give the players the control over the initiative as I did with Popcorn Initiative (<http://angrydm.com/2013/09/popcorn-initiative-a-great-way-to-adjust-dd-and-pathfinder-initiative-with-a-stupid-name/>) and not break a damned thing.

As for attack rolls and damage rolls, people get so caught up in attack rolls and damage rolls and try to impose them on everything. I had a group of players the other night, in a D&D game, confused by the fact that, when they snuck up on a group of sleeping opponents, I let them just kill them automatically. No attack roll. No coup de grace bulls\$&%. Just “yeah, they're dead.” They made their rolls to sneak. That was enough.

Why? Because attack rolls and damage rolls are there to resolve a specific action: trying to kill someone who is in a position to defend themselves. It's kind of like a Climb check. I wouldn't ask for a Climb check for you get onto a horse because, even though there is a similarity between that and climbing, that's not what Climb is meant to resolve. An attack roll is meant to resolve the combat action of trying to kill someone with a weapon while there is some chance he could defend himself.

Now, am I suggesting you do away with all of the combat rules of D&D? No. Of course not. But what you have to understand is that they don't override the other rules of the game. Everything else that is possible in D&D is still possible in combat. Any creative, clever use of skills, actions, tools, whatever. Ability checks, saving throws, knowledge checks, all of that crap. None of it goes away. And more importantly, all of the higher level rules, the metarules, still apply. Those rules about the DM describing the situation, the player deciding how to act, the DM deciding if a die roll is warranted and what roll to use, the DM presenting the outcome, and the DM asking for the next action. Those all still apply. You still need them.

The combat chapter of the rulebook is an overlay. It applies a structure to the game. It puts things in order. But it doesn't change any of the other rules. And you *could* throw the structure away and wing it and D&D would still work fine.

We'll come back to why this is important to understand too. Because we have one more shocking fact to explain.

### **Avoid Using the Combat Rules Whenever Possible**

I realize this is the most controversial thing I'm going to say: always look for opportunities to throw the combat rules out (initiative, action economy, and so on). Because, the fact is, they are pretty limited. They don't work particularly well except in very specific situations (remember the disclaimer, I love combat, stay calm). Specifically, they work well in pitched battles between two roughly equal forces (you know, within a few levels and roughly equally sized). That's it.

Look, you don't try to turn everything in the game into a Strength check. You don't try to turn everything in the game into an Interaction scene. You use the Strength check when a Strength check is what you need. And use Interaction scenes when there is actually an interaction. For that matter, you don't roll

the f\$&%ing dice just because a person does a thing. You need the possibility of success, the possibility of failure, and risks or consequences that make it matter. Right?

So don't try to turn everything into a combat just because you have two forces using violence against each other. If you can get away with not using the combat rules and end up with a scene that is just as good (or better), don't use them. And that goes for even partial things, like initiative. I've seen some DMs use initiative rolls in social interaction scenes to keep things going in some kind of order. And that's terrible. Those DMs need to stop it. Because initiative order is inherently constraining. Especially in something like an open conversation. How do people jump in and support other people's points? What if they have nothing useful to say when their turn comes up? Why impose that structure instead of just, as a DM, managing the pace.

Always always always ask yourself whether you really have a combat meant to be handled by the combat rules before you ask for initiative rolls. Try to put off the initiative roll as long as possible. And try to drop out of the combat rules as soon as you can. Your game will simply be better.

### **Putting the Three Facts into Practice**

Whew! I wrote a lot of words, huh? And you probably think I'm all done and you're saying "that Angry DM is a genius! I sure am I glad I relaxed and listened to what he had to say and I look forward to running less worse games! Thank you, sir!" Well, shut up, private! I'm not done yet. And don't you call me sir. I work for a living.

I'm going to give you a few takeaways now. A few tips and ideas that grow out of a good understanding of these rules. Some of them will be a little longer than brief, but they will be worth it. So read on. And come back in two weeks for Part 2 where we will talk about actually building good combat scenes which I know is the part you really want.

### **When Someone Tells You To Have Alternate Goals, They Don't Understand Combat**

I'm going to start by debunking a piece of s\$&% advice that I see repeated a lot online. People will tell you "include alternate goals in your combat other than just 'killing everybody.'" This is a well-intentioned piece of advice, but it is utter horsesh\$&% because it actually shows a lack of awareness of the first shocking fact. Combat does not have a goal. Combat is something that happens when two forces find their goals are in conflict and decide to resolve it with murder. The PCs want to explore the tomb, the zombies want to kill all living things that enter the tomb. Conflict. The PCs want to rescue the captive, the goblins want to defend their home. Conflict. Ignore this advice. You no longer need it. Just make sure you know why the conflict is happening and the "alternate goals" will handle themselves.

### **Combat Outs: Because People Don't Understand How Combat Ends Either**

Another piece of crappy advice that has been circulating for some time is "build a way out of combat so the players can end a fight early if they want to." There is a LOT wrong with that statement. But it comes down to a misunderstanding about how combat ends. The idea behind the advice is to create some sort of action the players can take to end the fight. Mangalores won't fight without a leader. If the PCs can sound the Horn of Triumph, the goblins will flee in terror. If the party can activate the shrine of magicalness, the elementals will all be banished. And so on.

Now, having situations like that isn't inherently bad. It's cool sometimes to build that sort of thing into a fight. I support it if it is part of the story, especially if it rewards the players for clever thinking, solving problems, or exploring the world. But I do have a problem with the phrase "ending combat early." It implies that combat is supposed to last for a certain amount of time. And that's just f\$&%ing insane.

Now, I realize that D&D (and games like it) are built around balanced challenges. The numbers in D&D work out so that you can expect a combat of challenge level X to last for Y number of rounds and expend Z percent of the party's resources. And that's fine to know. That's a helpful adventure planning tool (if you want to use it). But that doesn't mean every combat MUST last Y round and cost Z resources, nor does it mean every encounter must be of challenge X. It's just the way the game is presented that makes it FEEL that way sometimes.

In truth, a given battle can only end in one of three ways:

The heroes are incapable of continuing the fight (because, for example, they are dead)  
The enemies are incapable of continuing the fight (because, for example, they are dead)  
Both sides are unwilling to continue the fight

That's it. Those are the only ways a battle can end. Either one side is dead or disabled or critically injured or teleported to another plane or whatever and can't keep fighting or both sides have decided the fight is over. And it has to be both sides.

Suppose one side decides, for example, they are done with the fight. They are giving up. They surrender. But the other side (perhaps zombies) do not accept their surrender and instead continue fighting. Well, the side that surrendered can either defend itself or die. Now you might say "oh ho, what if one side simply flees." And I will say "you are not as smart as you think you are."

See, if one side flees, the other side has to be willing to let them escape or be incapable of catching them and continuing the fight. So, if the PCs flee and the goblins don't pursue or give up the pursuit, both sides basically agreed the fight was over. Otherwise, if the goblins can't keep up, the goblins were unable to continue the fight even though they wanted to and the fight is over. If the goblins do keep up, the fight continues.

But that's it. That's the only way battles end. A battle will continue as long as both sides are willing and able to continue the fight.

### **The Most Important Decision DMs Never Make**

Speaking of goals and how combat ends, let's talk about the one decision DMs always forget to make. At the start of every round of combat, each creature on the battlefield needs to ask itself "am I going to continue fighting this round?" The reason most DMs fail to make this decision is because they don't think about why the fight is happening and what the monsters want and all that crap I already talked about. But by not making that decision, the DM removes one of the three ways the fight can end. Namely, the DM makes it impossible for both sides to agree to stop fighting before one side is destroyed.

Now, once upon a time, there was a thing called morale. It was a system of random dice rolls that determined when a monster was no longer willing to fight. And I've seen people call for its return and I've seen people design new morale systems. These people need to be stopped. Find them and beat them with a Rolemaster book until they stop. We don't need die rolls for morale!

Look, you make every other decision for your monsters, right? You decide what tactics they use and who they attack and where they move. And now that I've told you all that other crap, you're never again going to run a battle without knowing what the monsters want and why they are fighting. So you don't need a morale system.

But, every round, you need to look at each creature's situation and decide if that creature is willing to stick out the fight. Does that goblin think it can win? Is it willing to die trying? Does it have an opportunity to slip away? Will it cower and beg for its life? And you need to use your better judgement, common sense, and understanding of the creature. Hobgoblins are more disciplined and militaristic than goblins. Most animals won't die trying to obtain food, but they will die defending their young. Mindless undead won't flee, but a ghoul might drag away a disabled or unconscious PC to eat while the other ghouls keep fighting. It's just one of those decisions that you need to make for every creature every round.

Now, I know some of you are going to point out that players are monsters and will often cut down fleeing foes. And that's fine. I had a group of players not too long ago insist on murdering a predatory giant bird that took a few hits and decided the party wasn't a good meal. That's fine. But that's the players' call to make. Your call is how to play the monster in the first place. Eventually, if the players see enough creatures give up and don't come back to haunt them, they'll start letting them get away. Especially if they know they get the XP anyway.

### **Zombie Hordes, Colossal Giants, and Avoiding the Combat Rules**

Let me tell you a story.

A few weeks ago on Twitter, someone looked at the cover of the D&D 5E PHB that depicts a tiny human fighting an absolutely huge-ass giant. Like, the giant could probably swallow the human. And the Twitter person (sadly, I don't remember who and I'm too lazy in this case to scroll back through my long, loooooonnnnggg feed to find them), said "when are we going to be able to actually play out scenes like that in D&D?" And I said "when people realize the combat rules don't apply to s\$&% like that." Because the D&D combat rules really only work when two forces of roughly equal power level are going at each other. The bigger the mismatch, the more the abstractions in the rules ruin the scene.

For example, imagine tenth level PCs facing down a horde of fifty zombies, each with half a challenge level or whatever. Maybe they are guarding a town gate. Right? I'd love for my game to have that scene. And it doesn't really strain my credulity. Gimli, Will Turner, and Viggo basically won the battle of Helm's Deep or Minas Tirith or whatever. But could you imagine trying to run that in a standard D&D combat? It'd be boring as hell! And depending on the edition, the zombies would pose practically no threat at all. It'd be boring and low stakes. Which is why I'd run it narratively. I wouldn't try to impose combat rules and an action economy on it. I'd handle it more freeform. Let the players wade through a few zombies with each good hit, don't roll for damage, just assume a hit kills, give the zombies a few attacks in response to every action the players take, and so on. It'd be a f\$&%ing awesome scene.



By the same token, look at the cover of the PHB. Go on, explain to me how a fighter is going to run up to that thing's ankle and make any sort of useful attack in the standard sense of an attack. At the same time, the giant's size and bulk start to work against it. Most of the time, it's going to be reacting to the PCs, waiting for them to provide opportunities to stomp them, grab them, throw them, shake them off, etc. Again, putting that in the standard combat encounter rules makes it way less cool. And it doesn't make whole bunches of narrative sense. At that point, you're just following the mechanical rules because the idea of a halfling plunging a rapier into the flank of a dragon the size of a yacht and having any actual effect is patently ridiculous. You need a Shadow of the Colossus type setup. Or Dragon's Dogma. Narrative coolness. Not combat rules.

Another thing the initiative rules and action economy don't handle well is evasion and retreat. On the rare occasions when the party tries to get away from something, especially if they go for a fighting withdrawal, they end up tripping over the action economy and the turn order. It becomes an impediment. And DMs rarely seem to want to drop the initiative order once the party has agreed to flee and run things more narratively. And because the players can't see a good plan for retreat that works within the combat rules, they end up never retreating, no matter how much trouble they are in. And if the players actually recognize the amount of trouble they are in and flee, they are probably in a total-party kill situation. Players are really thick-headed about recognizing emergencies.

Once you recognize that the combat rules are utterly optional and they only work when you have two mostly equal forces, you realize how easy it is to drop out of them whenever you want to or need to or whenever it is just cooler to do so. So, the moment you find yourself in a situation where the combat rules don't work or weren't meant to work, drop them. Get out of initiative order, run things narratively, shotgun the turn order however makes the most sense, and go with your gut. You'll run better fights.

And that's ultimately what all of this s\$&% is about, right? Running better fights. If you can run a better game by breaking the rules - any of the rules - do it! Or else you're in this for the wrong reasons.

Now, come back here in two weeks and I'll tell you how actually build better fights.