The Angry Guide to Kickass Combats (Part 2): The Battlefield and the Battlefeels
by The Angry DM

Welcome to Part 2 of The Angry Guide to A$%kicking Combats! In the last part, we looked at how to analyze monsters so that you can put together good groups of baddies to slaughter those stupid player characters with. And, you know what? That might be enough for you. Seriously. That might be all you need. Because from here on out, things get rougher. Today we're going to talk about the other TWO factors that make a combat great. And then, in next week's FINAL PART (I promise, I'm as sick of writing this s$&% as you are of reading it), we're going to put it all together and build four great D&D combats. Yes, that's right. Your reward for slogging through upwards of 20,000 words will be a glimpse behind my screen at my process for building combat encounters using everything I've talked about.

But if you want to complete that journey, there's some uncomfortable things we have to discuss first. You deserve some fair warnings.

Caveat Number 1: This is Hard Work

I'm not going to lie to you. I may be rude, obnoxious, tactless, abusive, and egomaniacal, but I am not a liar. It takes effort to build a good combat. You CAN just drop a bunch of stat blocks in a room, eyeball the difficulty, and call it a day, but that is NEVER going to compare with a carefully crafted, well-thought out combat. Now, maybe that's good enough for you and good enough for your players. I won't tell you you're wrong, but I will tell you you're settling for less than your full potential. You have to decide if it's worth it. And if it isn't, don't use my advice. That's fine. But don't tell me it isn't worth it. Because that's a personal choice. It IS worth it for me.

But, take heart, gentlebeing, because there is an upside to this. Like everything, it gets easier and faster with practice. I can crank out a good battle in a few minutes on the back of a napkin nowadays. I can even improvise a pretty decent fight on the fly with a random monster. You get good at it if you work at it.

Caveat Number 2: Know Your Game

For this to work, you've got to know your f$&%ing game. You need to know your roster of beasties, you need to know what the PCs are capable of, and you need to know the rules of the game along with all the tactical options. Know what the players can do and know what the monsters can do. Now, again, this sort of system mastery comes with time. But it also comes with being willing to reread parts of the rules and leaf through the Monster Manual and Player's Handbook (or whatever your game uses) while you're on the toilet. Grab that book, sit down to lunch, and say "today, I'm going to review the paladin." Or "today, I'm going to reread the combat chapter. Oh, holy crap, Dodge is an action?"

If you're not willing to become an expert in your game of choice, you're not willing to run great battles.

Caveat Number 3: Exciting, Challenging, Deadly Combat

Finally, for this to work, you've got to want to get the right things out a fight. See, combats are one of those places where the G in RPG shines forth. I'm not saying that fights aren't about role-playing and story, but what I am saying is that the stakes are high and victory is really uncertain. That is to say, the

players (and their characters) are facing a dangerous, deadly challenge. And they've got to earn their victory. Combats are a part of the story, but they are also part of the challenge. Now, if you don't care about challenging and endangering your PCs, you probably don't need my help. This is for people who want to make their PCs work for their victories and really feel like their life is in danger, as well as for people who enjoy the tense excitement of a GOOD battle.

The ABCs of Combat Design

Still here? Good. Do you WANT to be here? Good. You're not going to post a comment at the end about how this isn't worth it and just slapping a handful of orcs in a 10-foot by 10-foot room is just as good as anything I design, right? Good. Let's get it on.

Every battle has three major components that define it. To make it easy to remember, I call these the ABCs of Combat Design.

A Bunch of Creatures

A stands for "A Bunch of Creatures." That is to say, the enemy force, the group of baddies. Now this is such a big topic that I spewed out 6,000 words on it already. I won't go through that again. Suffice to say that when we talk about a bunch of creatures, we're talking about their goals, strategies, and tactics. Remember stat blocks equal tactics. Goals come from the encounter itself. And strategies connect the two.

A Battlefield Around the Combatants

B stands for "A Battlefield Around the Combatants." Every fight takes place somewhere. Fights don't take place in a void. Well, except for the ones that take place in a big, open room or an empty meadow or something. Those fights might as well be taking place in f$&%ing purgatory. They are boring as s$&% and utterly unforgivable. We're going to talk about terrain and battlefields in this article.

A Battle's Character

C stands for "A Battle's Character." And when we say character, we mean character as in flavor or type or kind. See, every battle has a sort of intangible flavor to it. And we're also going to talk about that in this article. Because that doesn't happen by accident unless you don't plan for it. And usually it depends on how the battle starts.

Remembering the ABCs

Now, some have criticized my ABCs as being contrived and difficult to remember. So, if you're one of those easily confused wusses who feels my abbreviations don't work very well, you can go with: Ambiance, Battlefield, and Creatures.

Now, you're not going to work in order. This isn't a step by step process. In fact, as you're going to see, you may start in different places for different encounters.

B is For Battlefield

We're going to start with B because it's easier to grasp than Ambiance, but it also gets more complicated. The Battlefield is the place where the fight takes place. It's the terrain. But it ISN'T the map. And that's the most important distinction. See, most people think of the tactical map of the battle as just the space for the battle to happen in. But the Battlefield (a real, well-designed battlefield) actually interacts with the fight. It is almost like a separate character. Which is why you don't just design a battle and put it in a room. Designing the battlefield is part of the designing the battle.

How Terrain Shapes the Battlefield

Imagine a sword-and-shield fighter trying to fight his way past an archer. He'll run up and kill the archer, right? Now, imagine the archer is on the other side of a ravine. If there is no way to get across, the fighter should probably retreat. Otherwise, he's just going to keep getting shot until he's dead. Now, imagine there's a bridge across the ravine, but it's a hundred feet away. While the fighter runs to the bridge, crosses the bridge, and then runs back to the archer, he's going to take a lot of damage. He may not even survive the journey. Imagine the fighter and the archer are fighting in an open meadow? Now imagine they are fighting in a rubble-strewn battlefield where the fighter can move from cover to cover until he gets close. Now imagine they are fighting in a tight labyrinth. See how this works?

The terrain changes the battlefield drastically. Even seemingly simple terrain. Just changing the difference between the fighter and the archer changes everything. If they start off close up, the fighter has the advantage. if they start far away, the archer has the advantage.

But terrain can also create choices. Imagine the archer is standing not on the other side of a ravine, but on the other side of a boiling field of mud. The fighter can charge across it, but he's going to be burned badly for his trouble. Or he can run around it, taking several rounds of damage from the archer. Now, that's an easy choice to make. Just compare the potential damage of each option. But there are other decisions that are not so easy.

Now, in order to understand how terrain affects the battlefield, it is helpful to break terrain down into different categories based on what it actually does.

Walls and Other Obstructions

Literally the hardest terrain feature you have to deal with is the wall. This is a bit of terrain that says "none shall pass." You can't walk through it, you can't see through it, you can't shoot through it. It is just in the f$&%ing way in every sense of the word. They force people to move around them. But people can also use the corners for cover. In general, ranged combatants hate walls, but love corners of walls. But also, outnumbered parties love lots of walls because they can keep themselves from getting surrounding.

Chokepoints and Funnels

When obstructions get close together, you have the opportunity for chokepoints or funnels. These are places on the battlefield where all the traffic, all the movement, all the lines of sight have to pass through a very small area. A doorway is a perfect example of a chokepoint. Anything that wants to get from one side to the other has to go through the chokepoint. Now, chokepoints allow for a lot of power,

a lot of control. A group that controls a chokepoint limits how the enemies can move and target others, but they also end up limiting themselves. We've all seen the adventurers who get stuck in the doorway, watching the fighter smacking two orcs, while the other orcs pace around in the room beyond. Chokepoints are great for outnumbered parties and strong melee combatants love to control them, but they can really be a mixed blessing.

Fogs, Shrouds, Darkness, Gossamer Curtains, and Obscurement

Obscurement is kind of a weird terrain feature. It is anything that blocks or impedes line of sight based on position, but doesn't block movement. It can lay over the entire battlefield (darkness or fog, for example) or it might be limited to specific areas (like vines, curtains, the smoke from a bonfire, or the thick vapor rising from fumaroles and boiling mudpots). In general, obscurement makes life more difficult for ranged combatants and makes life easier for the targets of ranged attacks (e.g.: the melee combatants).

Statues, Pillars, Trees, Boulders, and Other Cover

To be quite honest, cover terrain doesn't really deserve a callout of its own considering most cover terrain is actually just functionally a small wall. That is, you can't move through it and it blocks line of sight. But if I left it out, people would whine in the comment section. So, here it is. Cover is basically just Obstruction.

Pits, Ravines, Rivers, Chasms, Barricades, Portcullises, Arrow Slits, and Other Ground Obstacles

A ground obstacle is anything that impedes or prevents movement but doesn't block line of sight. An archer or wizard can easily launch arrows and fireballs over a pit or river, but a warrior or rogue has a hard time crossing one without taking time, risking danger, or finding alternate routes. Thus, ground obstacles are the evil twin of obscurement. Ranged combatants love them but melee combatants hate them. I know it seems weird to think of an arrow slit or a barred gate as a Ground Obstacle, but they do the same thing. They permit ranged attacks while preventing movement.

Fire, Lava, Boiling Mud, Acid, Stinging Vines, Swinging Axe Blades, and Hazards

Hazards are nasty pieces of terrain. They simply punish anyone who moves in the wrong spot. They may or may not impede line of sight, but otherwise they function kind of like soft obstructions. Most of the time, a hazard is just a wall or ground obstacle, but a brave creature can decide to move through the wall or obstacle at a risk or cost.

Booby Traps

A good booby trap is an invisible piece of terrain. A bad booby trap is an invisible screwjob. The major difference is what happens AFTER the trap goes off. For example, imagine a pit trap in the middle of the battlefield. If someone steps there, they will fall, get hurt, and maybe be out of the battle for several rounds or more. And a clever foe may try to draw a strong melee combatant into the booby trap. But after the trap goes off, there's a new piece of terrain, a ground obstacle, a pit. And it continues to affect the battle just like any obstacle would.

On the other hand, imagine an arrow trap that fires one arrow and then never does anything again. A creature might trigger it, take some surprise damage for stepping in the wrong spot and failing a perception check or saving throw, and then the arrow trap never does anything else to shape the battle. That's just an invisible screwjob. If you want to use them, fine. But they are boring crap.

Rubble, Broken Floors, Waist Deep Water, Thick Mud, Underbrush, and Other Impeding Terrain

Impeding or difficult terrain is terrain that has no other effect except to slow someone down. Mobile characters and melee combatants hate impeding terrain because it makes movement harder. Ranged characters love it because what it really is is distance that doesn't change ranges. That is to say, a ranged combatant on the other side of a flow of sucking mud is at point-blank range from a melee combatant while at the same time being multiple rounds of movement away. This is great for short ranged attackers.

Tables, Chairs, Crates, Barrels, Chandeliers, Amphoras, Altars, and Other Props

Props like barrels and braziers and campfires are tough to classify. The reason is because they are variable. Someone can tip over a table and use it as cover. Someone can tumble a barrel down the stairs as a weapon. Or swing on a chandelier or drop it like a trap. Props are fun because (a) give some flavor to the battlefield and (b) let players and creatures be creative and do interesting things with whatever is at hand. Any given prop could potentially give an advantage to anyone creative enough to take advantage of it.

Distance: The Forgotten Terrain Feature

And then there is the one everyone forgets. Distance is a terrain feature. And it is weirdly more complicated than people realize.

See, melee combatants need to be up close and personal to be effective. And that means they need to cover ground quickly to get into a position to attack. Meanwhile, most PC parties and many enemy groups also include some ranged attacks options. An adventuring party usually has one or two dedicated melee fighters, one or two dedicated ranged fighters, and often someone who can function equally well at both melee and range. Obviously, PC groups can vary a lot.

Distance buys everyone time before the melee combatants can wade into the fight. During that time, ranged fighters can do their thing and punish the enemy, characters can find defensive positions to hold, creatures can claim terrain features like chokepoints, or they can use their time to power themselves up using defensive and buffing spells.

But the thing with distance is that it isn't just about as-the-crow-flies squares. A goblin on a scaffold with a 30-foot ladder is a long way away even if the scaffold is only ten feet from the party because climbing that ladder is slow. The goblin has time to burn before the melee combatants get into range.

And some weird things create distance without actually putting more distance in front of the party. For example, imagine the party is fighting in a cave filled with boiling mud pools. The evil mud manticore flinging spikes at the party may not be that far away, but if the only route to it is a long, circuitous path of bare rock between all the mud pools, it is effectively pretty far. And that's what I meant when difficult terrain is actually just a way of creating distance without increasing the distance.

Open Space: The Other Forgotten Terrain Feature

The other terrain feature that most people forget is even a terrain feature is open space. But it is an important component. In general, tight, constrained spaces make life easier for whichever side has fewer combatants. Open spaces serve the group that has a numerical advantage well. Why? Because the group with more creatures can more easily outmaneuver the other. They can outflank, they can surround, they can spread out among multiple targets. Tight, limit mobility the group with greater numbers ends up bumping into itself and tripping over itself. Of course, open space is useful for ranged combatants, but it can be a mixed blessing because it also makes it easier for enemies to close with them.

Vectors of Approach: The Terrain Feature No One Has Ever Heard Of

And finally, we'll end with a brief discussion of vectors. A vector is simply a direction from which one group can approach another. Like open space and distance, vectors of approach are features that exist as a result of other terrain. If the party is in the middle of a four way intersection, there's four potential vectors of approach, four directions from which the party can expect trouble. On the other hand, if they open a door and step through, there is really only one vector of approach; the enemy must come from the other side of the door. Broadly speaking, vectors of approach refer to all the different directions from which the party can expect trouble OR all the different directions from which the party can visit trouble on someone else.

Understanding How Terrain Interacts with Combatants

I could write another six thousand words on terrain alone, but there's a certain point where I just get bored talking about a topic. Besides, I can't do ALL the work here, because the key to really designing good combats is to learn how to think about combat. So, you're going to need to step in and do some of the f$&%ing work now.

See, I've pointed out that ranged combatants like some things and melee combatants like other things and I've blathered a bit about maneuvering and numerical advantage, but there's a crap-top of other factors to consider too. For example, a wizard that can lay down big area-of-effect spells like Melf's Atomic Conflagration or whatever needs open space to work in. Or else it ends up impossible to place without nuking party members. Creatures with abilities that let them do extra damage if they surprise their opponent (backstab, sneak attack, assassination) benefit from ways to break line of sight like obstructions and obscurement, but they also need room to maneuver so they can outflank opponents and then disengage.

This is why I said you've got to know your game. Because you've got to be able to figure out how the terrain you design is going to affect the battle. But when we get to the part about actually designing an encounter, I'll give you a way to make this analysis easier because I'm just that awesome!

Mapping the Battlefield

Let me commit some gaming heresy because I haven't gotten enough death threats this week: give up on graph paper. F$&% graph paper. Graph paper is your worst enemy from here on out. Even if you're

going to run D&D on a grid with miniatures, you are done with graph paper. Done. You do not need it. In fact, it gets in your way.

See, you can't think of a battlefield as a series of tiles, each tile with one und precisely one feature in it. Instead. a battlefield is about traffic flow, about how the battlefield affects the people in the fight, and about how they can use the battlefield. And the best way to do this is get the f$&% off the graph paper.

Instead, sketch out vague blobs of terrain functions. "This area is open." "This blob is hazardous." "Here's a chokepoint." "I'll scatter some props here." When it comes time to finalize the map, you can turn it into a nice encounter map simply by replacing the blobs with actual features that fulfil the purpose you decided on. "The open area is a cave. And the hazard is a boiling field of thick mud. The walls of the cave are close together here. And here's some ancient urns left by some forgotten civilization." As you perform that translation, you might find some of the terrain morphs a little bit. That's fine, as long as it retains its basic function. "Well, the boiling mud is impeding as well as hazardous and it belches thick, noxious vapor, so it's also obscuring."
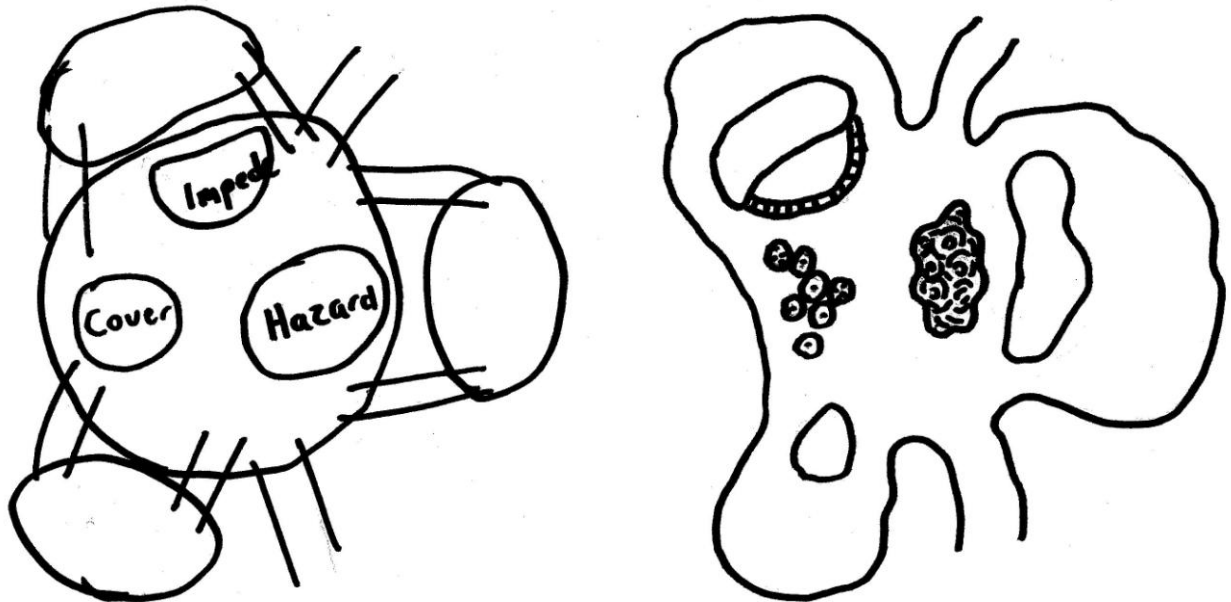
And once you start to think in those terms, you'll start to notice similarities in battlefields you might never have noticed before. That clearing in the woods with the pond? That's the same battlefield as the cave with the ravine, the natural bridge, and the stalagmites and stalactites in the corners. Which is remarkably similar to that temple with the demon statue face vomiting murky brackish water into a "reflecting pool." And hey, remember that frozen canyon a few weeks ago with the pine trees, the

snowdrifts, and the frozen pond with the broken ice? Yeah, that's all the same.
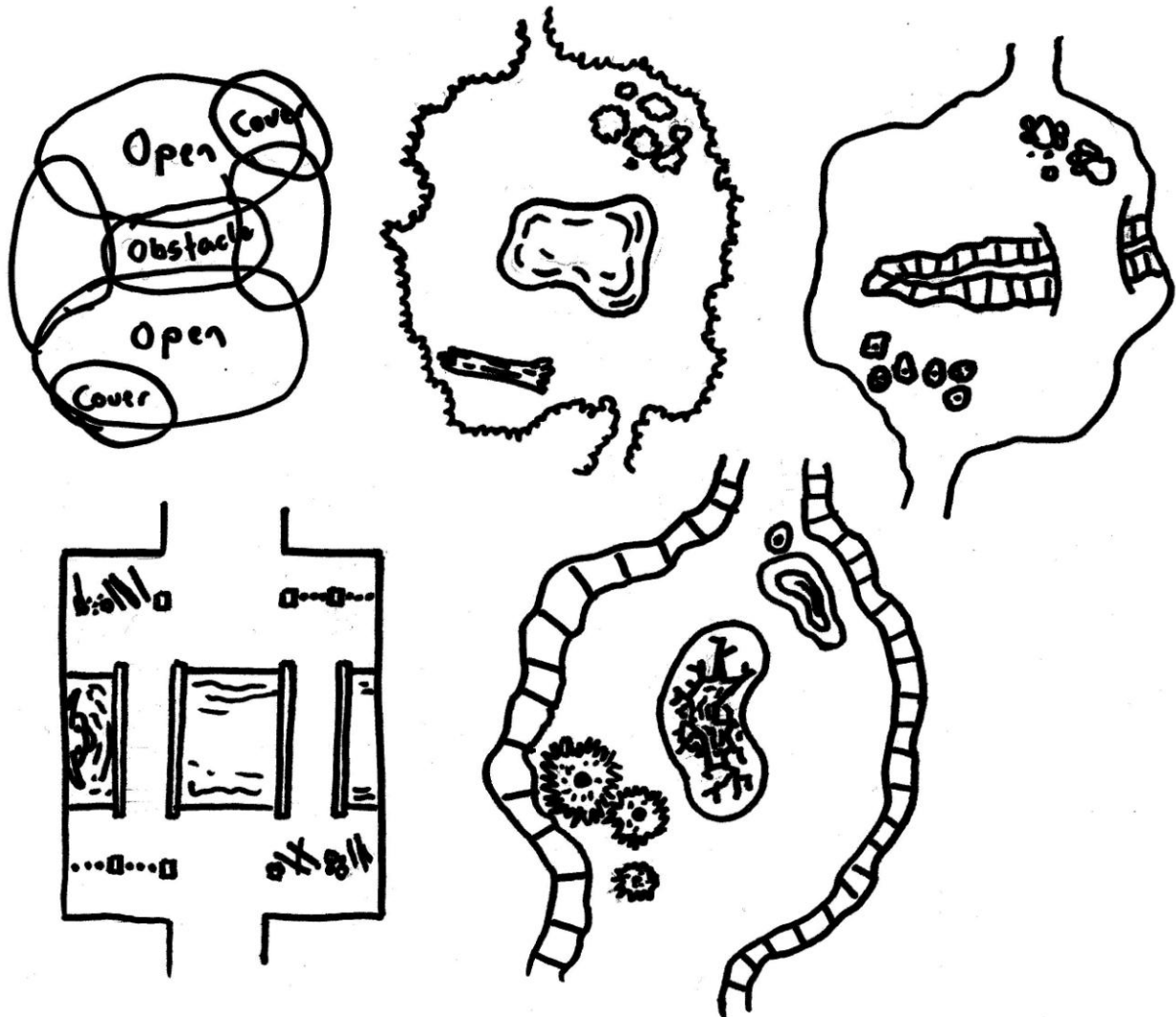

But Angry, I can hear you whining, what about movement and distance. How will I know how far away things are without squares? Squares are irrelevant. The dirty little secret about movement is that it doesn't matter how far apart things are, what matters is how many actions you need to cover the distance. Most creatures in D&D, for example, move about 25 to 30 feet or 5 to 6 squares. That's how far a person can move and still do something, in D&D and Pathfinder. It doesn't really matter that the archer's protected position is exactly 50 feet away or exactly 10 squares away. What matters is it takes two moves to get there, so a PC can't cover the distance and stab the archer in the same turn, but he can close in one turn so the archer won't get off a shot while the PC covers the ground. If the distance is THREE moves, then the PC can only get part way there on one turn and the archer can shoot at him before he finishes closing the distance and attacks.

When I sketch out an area, I try to have a sense of scale in terms of "moves." Is this area small enough to cover in four moves? Or so big it takes eight moves or ten? How far is this defensible position away from the open ground that the evil wizard is watching over? You'll see how this plays out when we build

encounters at the end of this article. But for now, just understand that you don't need squares. Just a sense of moves.
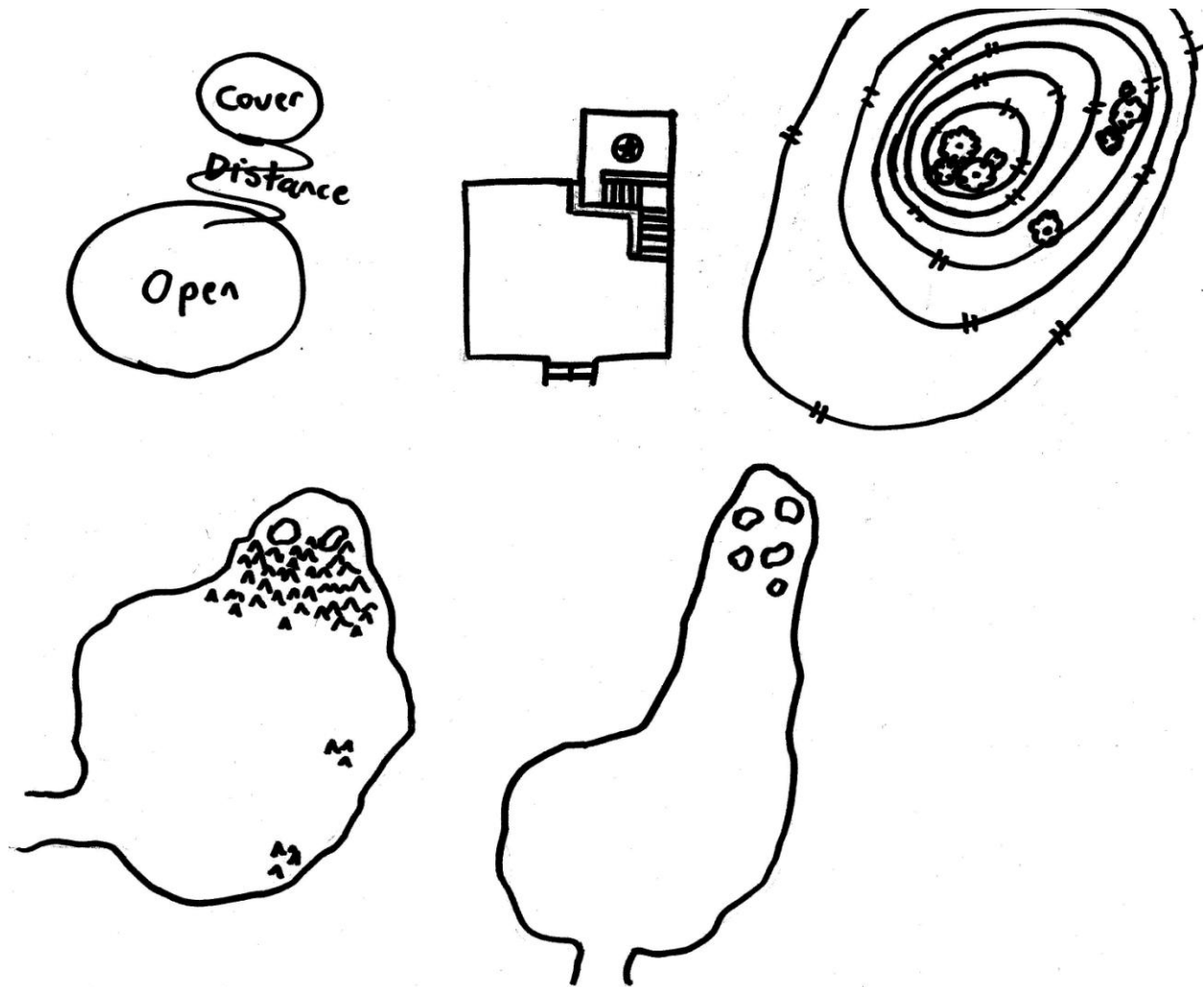
I should also note that, when I'm sketching an area, if I need to "add distance," I add a windy path to indicate I need to do something in there to chew up extra moves. Or a blob that says "impede" or something. When I finalize the map, I replace it with a set of stairs, a steep slope that slows movement, broken ground, or I just stretch out the map to add some literal distance.

You'll also notice that even my final maps don't usually end up on graph paper. You might choose to do otherwise. That's fine. But you don't NEED to. You can convert the distances in your head at the rate of 5 squares to one "move." You can just eyeball it. The point is, you don't need the level of precision that you think you need once you understand what's really important.

A is for Ambiance

Now, I could have done this whole article just on terrain and mapping. But then, that would have spread this whole series out into EVEN MORE articles. And no one wants that. Besides, this Ambiance thing, as important as it is, just isn't big enough to carry a whole article. See, Ambiance is a big factor in combat, but, as vague and nebulous as it is, it's also pretty simple. Ambiance is how the combat feels.

Did you ever play Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare? Yeah, that's right. You heard me correctly. I said "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare." The hyper-macho first person modern military gun wank game that everybody claims to hate despite the fact that it sold umpteen million copies. Well, let me tell you something: it's a great example of D&D encounter and adventure design.

First of all, the game is broken down into a variety of disparate encounters. Basically, you walk into an area and a fight breaks out in that area. You push through the area, trying to achieve a goal, and when you get there, that encounter is over. Then you walk a little ways and end up in the next encounter. A new fight breaks out, you achieve a new objective, and then back to wandering. When you think about it, that's a D&D adventure. You have an encounter, accomplish a goal, and then there's some exploration or transition to bring you to the next encounter. It stops and starts.

But the big thing we care about is the second of all thing. The second of all is that the ambiance of each encounter, the type of encounter, the flavor, the feel, it's different every time. Sometimes, you enter an area and you're above the enemy who are all gathered together in the middle of the space and you start gunning them down while they scatter and you feel empowered. Other times, you enter an area and you're surrounded. Enemies are looking down on you and you have to scurry to find cover before you can fight back. You feel at a distinct disadvantage. Sometimes, you have to advance slowly and methodically, checking every nook and cranny, picking off foes, and making steady progress. Other times, you have to surge forward, spraying ammo and screaming incoherently as the enemy soldiers drop like flies made of swiss cheese. But the point is that every fight feels different.

Most of the ambiance of a battle is established by the way the battle starts. So much so that it is okay to think of the ambiance as the battle's opening. But opening starts with "o," so it can't be one of the ABCs of Asskicking Battle Design, can it?

In addition to the starting positions, ambiance is influenced by other factors, such as relative numbers and power levels. A fight against a ravening horde of zombies feels different from a fight against four elite zombies and both feel different from the fight against the giant zombie hulk, just because of the size of the enemy force. A fight against a massive, ancient dragon feels different from a fight against a smaller, but more cunning and evasive young dragon.

Now, D&D gives you two mechanisms that pertain to the ambiance of the fight: difficulty (easy, moderate, hard, etc.) and surprise. Difficulty is one of the things you determine when you are building the battle. Surprise is determined at the table. But there are so many other factors to consider as well. How far apart are the forces when the battle starts? Where are they relative to each other? Is one side or the other outflanked? Does one side have an advantageous position? Or a disadvantageous position? Are the foes in formation or scattered?

It is hard to give quantitative advice about battle ambiance because it really is about how the fight feels. But ultimately, the feel of the fight comes down to one word: empowerment. Are the PCs starting at an advantage, at a disadvantage, or are they neutral. To define the feel of the fight, answer that question and explain why in a single sentence. "The PCs are at a disadvantage because they've walked in to a goblin ambush." "The PCs have no particular advantage or disadvantage because they just blundered into a band of wandering orcs." "The PCs are at an advantage because they can hear the bugbears coming and assume strong starting positions."

You can also feel free to come up with more complex, more descriptive ambiance. Really, you're just describing the opening of the battle and how it changes the fight. More importantly, you can start to establish conditional ambiance. "If the PCs enter by way of the balcony, they have an advantage because they can rain death on the kobolds in the courtyard. But if they enter by the lower door, they have no such advantage because they blunder into the kobolds." "If the PCs succeed at their Perception checks, they hear the loud bugbears coming and can prepare for their arrival. If the bugbears succeed at their Perception checks, they will sneak up to the party."

In the end, the ambiance is sort of the one sentence pitch for the battle. And it's the thing people are going to remember the battle for. Because you want your battles to be remembered. If a battle is going to be forgotten, it isn't worth playing.

**Building Asskicking Battles**

Okay, we've covered Ambiance, Battlefields, and Creatures. You have everything you need to build great battles. In fact, you can probably do it now. Because a lot of it is just putting the different elements together: Ambiance, Battlefield, and Creatures.

BUT…

I'm going to follow this article up with one more article and you'll have it one week. In that article, I'm going to crack open my brain and let you see how my brain plans my asskicking battles for my own game. And, I'm going to leave you with four different combats.

Two of them will be based on my creature analysis from the last article: I'm going to do hobgoblins guarding the gate and I'm going to do ghouls. So, feel free to check out the DM Basic Rules and take a look at goblins, hobgoblins, and ghouls.

The third battle will be based on a battlefield that popped into my head and seemed like a neat place to build a fight. I want to have an adventure in a vertical cave underneath a giant tree. It is the entrance to a series of water-filled, plant-themed caves. A bridge of tree roots leap over the cavern (holding up a small, flat-topped rock island in the middle) and then wind down to the flooded cavern floor. Neat huh? I even drew a picture.
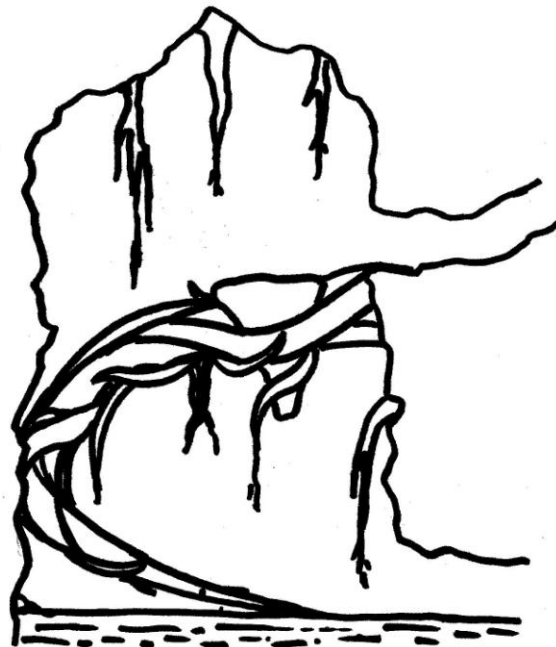
The fourth battle will be based on ambiance. I want the party on the top of a ridge looking down as a group of monsters chases an injured NPC. I want them to feel empowered to help, but also to know they don't have much time. Empowered and urgent.

So, join me in one week for my very final word on building asskicking combats. And then maybe we can talk about something else. Or maybe you can just leave me alone for a week? Huh?