

Raising the Stakes

Drama Rules for Action Fantasy Campaigns

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Raising the Stakes

These rules put the spotlight on the player characters, reduce the randomness of player-character deaths, and provide a simple but powerful stunt mechanic. They are built on the best house rule ever invented for d20: *Players Roll All The Dice*, which is reprinted here with minor corrections.

PLAYERS ROLL ALL OF THE DICE

In large combats, players often have little control over the outcome of events when it isn't their turn. This can lead to boredom if a player's attention drifts between his turns, threatening to distance him from the outcome of events.

One method of dealing with this problem is to put more dice rolling into your players' hands: allow your players to make all of the dice rolls during the combat.

This variant takes a lot of the work out of the GM's hands, since he no longer needs to make attack rolls, saving throws, or caster level checks to overcome spell resistance for his NPCs and monsters. That can free up his attention for more important things, such as NPC tactics, special spell effects, terrain, and the like. Most importantly, the GM can spend more time facing the players and making sure the game is fun for everyone.

Conversely, it requires the players to become much more active and aware of

what's going on. No longer can players snooze through all the turns but their own: They'll be rolling more dice than ever before — which (among other benefits) gives them the feeling of having greater control over their successes and failures.

The GM can still roll for the player characters in secret when secret spot, listen, search, or saves are required. As always, the GM avoid this if the players accept the responsibility for separating metagame and in-character knowledge.

While the following discuss assigning monsters new scores, any GM can use *Players Roll All The Dice* quite easily with existing d20 monster stats. Whenever a GM would roll a d20 for a monster opposing a PC, use a result of 12, remembering that players rolls a d20 and win ties.

Attacking and Defending

PCs make their attacks just like they do in the standard rules. Their opponents, however, do not. Each time an enemy attacks a PC, the character's player rolls a defense check. If that defense check equals or exceeds the attack score of the enemy, the attack misses.

To determine a creature's attack score, add 12 to the creature's standard attack modifier (the number it would use, as either a bonus or penalty to its attack roll, if it were attacking an ordinary situation

using the standard rules). For instance, an ogre has a standard attack modifier of +8 with its greatclub. That means that its attack score is 20.

To make a defense check, roll 1d20 and add any modifiers that normally apply to your Armor Class (armor, size, deflection, and the like). This is effectively the same as rolling d20, adding your total AC, and then subtracting 10.

Player's Perspective

Attack Score: 12 + enemy's attack bonus

GM's Perspective

Defense Check: 1d20 + character's AC modifiers

If a player rolls a natural 1 on a defense check, his character's opponent has scored a threat (just as if it had rolled a natural 20 on its attack roll). Make another defense check; if it again fails to avoid the attack, the opponent has scored a critical hit.

Enemy threat ranges expand exactly as you would expect: 19-20 is a range of 2, so it can threaten on a roll of 1 or 2, a threat range of 18-20 threatens on 1-3, and so on. The GM can simply keep in mind the size of the threat range (i.e. 1, 2, 3) without rewriting the weapon tables.

When a PC attacks an opponent, he makes an attack roll against the opponent's AC as normal.

Saving Throws and Save Scores

NPCs and other opponents no longer make saving throws to avoid special attacks of player characters. Instead, each creature has a Fortitude, Reflex, and Will score. These scores are equal to 12 + the creature's Fortitude, Reflex, and Will save modifiers.

Any time you cast a spell or use a special attack that forces an opponent to make a saving throw, instead make a magic check to determine your success. To make a magic check, roll 1d20 and add all the normal modifiers to any DC required by the spell or special attack (including the

appropriate ability modifier, the spell's level if casting a spell, the adjustment for Spell Focus, and so on).

If the result of the magic check equals or exceeds the appropriate save score (Fortitude, Reflex or Will, depending on the special ability), the creature is affected by the spell or special attack as if it had failed its save. If the result is lower than the creature's Fortitude, Reflex or Will score (as appropriate to the spell or special attack used), the creature is affected as if it had succeeded on its save.

Player's Perspective

Magic Check: 1d20 + spell level + ability modifier + other modifiers

Fortitude Save: Unchanged from standard d20.

Reflex Save: Unchanged from standard d20.

Will Save: Unchanged from standard d20.

GM's Perspective

Saving Throw DC: Unchanged from standard d20.

Fortitude Score: 12 + enemy's Fortitude save modifier

Reflex Score: 12 + enemy's Reflex save modifier

Will Score: 12 + enemy's Will save modifier

If a player rolls a natural 20 on a magic check, the creature's equipment may take damage (just as if it had rolled a natural 1 on its save; see Items Surviving after a Saving Throw).

Spell Resistance

If a PC has spell resistance, his player makes a spell resistance check against each incoming spell that allows spell resistance. A spell resistance check is 1d20 plus the PC's spell resistance, minus 10.

The DC of this check is equal to 12 + the attacker's caster level, plus any modifiers that normally apply to the attacker's caster level check to overcome spell resistance (such as from the Spell Penetration feat). That value is known as the attacker's caster level score. If the spell resistance check equals or exceeds this number, the spell fails to penetrate the PC's spell resistance.

To beat a creature's spell resistance, a player makes a caster level check (1d20 + caster level) against its spell resistance, just as in the standard rules.

Player's Perspective

Spell Resistance Check: 1d20 + SR - 10

Caster Level Check: Unchanged from standard d20.

GM's Perspective

Spell Resistance: Unchanged from standard d20.

Caster Level Score: 12 + attacker's caster level + modifiers

For the GM

Although a few numbers change on the player side, a GM can easily use Players Roll All The Dice with existing statblocks written for standard d20. Any time the GM would roll 1d20 for a check, the GM should simply use the number 12. Rather than writing up a separate statblock listing an attack score, simply use the attack modifier as usual and add 12 instead of rolling. *Remember:* Players always win the tie.

CONVICTION

Player Characters have a pool of Conviction, which functions like Action points. All PCs get 6 Conviction. Conviction is replenished at the beginning of each 4-hour session.

Conviction can be used per the table below:

Cost	Result
1	Roll twice, keeping the best roll *
2	Re-roll ■
2	Take an extra move-equivalent action ♦
3	Take an extra standard action ♦

- * Declare before any roll
- Declare after any roll, can be used multiple times for multiple re-rolls,
- ♦ On your turn only

THE DEATH FLAG

The death flag is definitely designed for campaigns where characters can't come back from the dead. This lets those campaigns get rid of random lethality without eliminating death altogether as a possibility. This is done with a change in the "social contract" between players and GM. Whereas in standard D&D the player is at the mercy of the GM and the rules, with the death flag the player decides when the stakes of a conflict are life and death.

As an Immediate action, a player character can choose to raise his Death Flag and gain 6 Conviction instantly (even if this brings their total Conviction pool above 6).

When the death flag is raised, the normal rules for death apply. If the death flag has not been raised, then the character, if killed, is treated as reducing the player character to 1 hit point above death. The Death Flag can be lowered by spending 6 Conviction.

Conviction Variant

As a variant, Conviction can be replenished every day (i.e. when spellcasters regain spells).

Examples

1. Player: "I attack the goblin, raise you a decapitation frightening his buddies against me falling prone."

GM: "Roll."

2. Player: "I attack the bulette, raise you 4d6 damage against it kicking me for 2d6 damage"

GM: "No bet." (even if the odds are normal, the bet favors the player too much).

3. Player: "I leap over the banister, raise you knocking out the kidnapper and the princess falling in love with me against accidentally landing on the princess."

GM: "Roll"

4. Player: "I search for anything hidden in this room, raise you we find the phylactery against the lich finds us."

GM: "Ah... tempting but no bet."

5. Player "If I hit the gnoll wizard, I do an extra 2d6 or take 2d6 damage from his buddy."

GM: "No bet."

6. Player: "OK, if I hit, I deal an extra 2d6 damage to the gnoll wizard and his friends are frightened. If I miss, the 3 gnolls drag me to the ground, I'm prone and grappled and I take 2d6 damage."

GM: Roll.

7. Player: "I walk up to the sorcerer and hit him with my dagger. I raise grappling him against getting knocked back 10 feet and taking 2d6 damage from cracking my head on the pillar."

GM: "Roll."

RAISING THE STAKES

At any time, a player can choose to make a 'raise' before rolling any d20 check. The terms of the raise are up to the player, but the GM can either accept (by saying "Roll") or decline ("no bet").

There are no limits on what a player can propose, but the GM always has the power to decline. If the GM thinks the odds are too much in favour of the PC (such as situation 2, above) the GM isn't ready for one or both consequences (situation 4), they can call "no bet."

Making a raise does not change anything about the original roll; calculation of target numbers and modifiers are left to the standard rules. Raises based on strong odds can be declined; those raises should involve unequal terms before the GM accepts them (this could be the difference between the situation 5 and 6).

Raises can also be used also to bypass mechanics that feel tedious (situation 7).

Note that the GM takes on a greater responsibility of fairness when using raises. The GM needs to make sure that he accepts raises in a way that is fair to all the players – that means declining and accepting raises with the same principles regardless of which player proposed it.

READING THE PLAYERS

When a player spends Conviction, they're saying "Hey, this is important to me. I want my character to have been the one that pulled this off - or at least, put everything into trying."

When a player raises the Death flag, they're saying "This is worth staking my character's life on."

When a player Raises they're saying "Hey, I have an idea to make this more exciting. What do you think?"

When a GM says "no bet" they're usually saying "Cool idea, but I'm not quite ready for that to happen right now."

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