

RANDOM GM TIP: NON-FOCAL RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

by [Justin Alexander](#) – August 26th, 2021



In the first episode of *The Mandalorian*, the titular character parks his ship and heads off on an adventure. In the second episode, he returns to find his ship being stripped for parts by opportunistic jawas. This prompts an incredible action/chase scene, followed by an adventure hook which results in some startling revelations.

While keeping in mind the [Principle of Using Linear Mediums as RPG Examples](#), let's assume that this isn't just an example of the GM having a cool idea and making it happen. (Nothing wrong with that, obviously.) If we wanted stuff like this in our games, what could we do to make that happen?

Non-focal random encounters.

Random encounters, of course, can be used to achieve several different effects. But one of the ways they can be used is as a procedural content generator, providing a creative prompt to the GM for an interstitial event. Because the "camera" of our game session is virtually always focused on the PCs, we tend to think of the events generated by the random encounter tables as intersecting the path of the party; it's something that happens randomly in the place where the PCs happen to be.

But it doesn't have to be!

You can just as easily use procedural content generators to model events happening off-screen.

For example, if the PCs leave mounts and/or henchmen at the entrance of a dungeon while they go delving within, I'll simply make random encounter checks for the group left behind. A notable example of this occurred when I ran [The Sunless Citadel](#) as part of my first D&D 3rd Edition campaign. The PCs left their mounts up on the surface while they went down into the citadel, I rolled regular random encounter checks, and when they returned they found the horses still there calmly munching grass... surrounded by a dozen scorched goblin corpses.

What the hell had happened?!

Ultimately, what I'm suggesting here is pretty simple:

Roll random encounters for locations/people that aren't the PCs.

That's it. That's the tip.

You can probably usefully generalize this by identifying what the PCs care about and then rolling encounters for those things. This might include people, places, organizations, etc. The rate and nature of these encounters will depend on what and where these things are. The henchmen at the dungeon entrance are easy because you can just roll on the dungeon's random encounter table (perhaps at a reduced rate if efforts have been made to conceal their camp). But what about the PCs' favorite tavern? Or their emotionally troubled ward? Or their political patron?

In the most generic version of this, however, you can just create the list of Important Things in the Campaign and then roll encounter checks for everything on the list as part of your session prep. If an encounter is indicated, that simply means that this element of the campaign world has seen some sort of interesting development: What is it? And, importantly, how will the PCs learn of it?

This can be a really easy way to keep a big, complicated campaign world in motion without needing to constantly grapple with the almost impossible enormity of the whole thing. It can also just be a good way of reminding the players that the campaign world does, in fact, continue to exist even when they're not looking at it.