RANDOM GM TIP: THE MOP-UP

by Justin Alexander – May 24th, 2021

We've reached the end of combat and the last bad guy is down to the dregs of his points. One of the players makes an attack roll… He hits!

And the Game Master says, "Don't bother rolling damage! He's dead!"

Don't do this.

Before we delve into why this is a bad idea, let's first talk about why the impulse exists: The combat is clearly coming to a conclusion and the remaining combatant poses no meaningful threat to the PCs, so there's no longer any tension or meaningful stakes in the scene; it's been reduced to a rote resolution. Heck! The bad guy might only have one or two hit points left, so the outcome really IS predetermined here, so why bother rolling the damage dice?

This is pointless! Let's wrap it up!

This impulse is not necessarily wrong. It's just mistimed.

The key thing here is the ownership of the win. When a player rolls a successful attack, deals damage, and the bad guy dies, that's something that THEY did. They own that moment.

If you, as the GM, interrupt that process, and declare a fiat success, you take that moment away from them: They didn't kill the monster; you did.

It's a subtle distinction, and it won't always result in the moment getting deflated, but it'll happen often enough that it's worth steering clear of this technique. Particularly since the benefit you're getting is so minor: You're saving… what? Fifteen seconds by having them skip the damage roll?

OTHER OPTIONS

The obvious alternative it to just **let them roll the damage** and then announce the result.

That works if the damage kills the bad guy anyways. But what if the attack doesn't *quite* deal enough damage to finish the job? This fight is boring! It's time to be done with it!

First, double-check to make sure that's actually true. As the GM, the fight has become boring because you can see the numbers and the outcome has become certain. In your role of playing the bad guys, you have lost meaningful agency and that's boring. But your experience here may not mirror the players: they haven't lost agency. In fact, they're about to reap the rewards of their agency! They're going to win! Winning is exciting!

Second, if it IS time for the fight to be done, the next easiest option is to **fudge the bad guy's hit points**. I'm generally not a big fan of fudging, but it's probably just fine here. You aren't actually changing the ultimate outcome here (which is where all the various problems with fudging come from); you're just speeding it up.

Another option is to **not initiate the attack roll**. When the player says, "I attack the monster with my sword!" you immediately assume they have successfully done that and describe the outcome. This is, in fact, in keeping with the *Art of Rulings*: The player has announced an intention to kill the monster. You know that this will definitely succeed. So the appropriate ruling is actually default to yes.

You might not think this would make a difference. It seems virtually indistinguishable from interrupting the damage roll! And there is still some risk here (from the declaration of intention, the player has a mental momentum reinforced by the rhythms of the combat system that's driving them towards the attack roll, and interrupting that momentum can be disruptive), but in my experience it's much less likely to cause a problem.

And you can enhance this technique by empowering the player's agency: When they say, "I attack the monster with my sword!" you can **ask the players to describe the coup de grace**. "Agnarr's mighty blow finishes off the goblin! What does that look like?"

Another alternative, if the combat is lagging and you're concerned the current PC's attack may not deal enough damage to end it if they roll poorly on the damage dice, is to **tell them how many hit points the monster has left** before they roll the damage dice. This is almost the exact opposite of fudging the monster's remaining hit points, effectively blocking you from using that technique.

The reason this works is that knowing the damage needed puts the table's intense focus on the damage roll: Everyone knows exactly what needs to be rolled, the tension will build as the dice are picked up, and then explosively release (either in triumph or failure) as the result is revealed. If the bad guy dies: Great! You've injected that moment with a little extra oomph!

If the bad guy doesn't die? That's okay! You've still clearly framed that this is the Final Countdown (so to speak) and that focus will tend to carry forward to the next player's attack.

Yet another option is to remove the moment entirely by training your players to **roll attack and damage simultaneously** (as described in *Fistfuls of Dice*).

END IT EARLIER

Taking a step back, it can also be useful to consider how we got to this specific moment: How could we have avoided getting to the point where a combat encounter is ending on a whimper?

The obvious answer here is to end the combat sooner.

One option is to have the bad guys run away! The PCs take out the Big Boss and that's the sign for the all the mooks to hightail it! Or, alternatively, the PCs take out a bunch of mooks and the Bandit King decides discretion is the better part of valor.

(Check out *The Principles of RPG Villainy* for a lengthier discussion of how and why having your bad guys run away is a good idea in any case.)

Surrender is another option, although that can have its own issues.

Alternatively, pursue the Default to Yes solution more aggressively: You don't have to get down to the very last bad guy's very last hit points to recognize that the encounter has reached its conclusion (and the end of the fight is now foreordained)! At that moment, a nice, clean option is to ask each player to describe what they do finish things up. (You can do this initiative order to provide a little structure if that's useful.)

A key thing here, though, is to make sure that there has actually been a conclusion! And that the players can feel ownership of that conclusion! (The example of the PCs taking down the Bandit King and then the mooks panicking is a good example: The combat ending is a clear result of the PCs doing something decisive and significant.)

I discuss this a bit in *GM Don't List #5*, but a GM prematurely ending combats because they routinely get bored with the fights they set up creates a number of other problems:

- Characters built to enjoy their spotlight time during combat are being punished.
- Strategically clever players often spend the first few rounds of combat setting up an advantageous situation, and it's frustrating if that gets prematurely negated.
- If players feel that encounters are being summarily dismissed (in a way that isn't affected by their agency), their uncertainty about which encounters are actually being determined by their actions will make it difficult for them to determine when and how to spend limited resources. (Burning a one-use potion or once-per-day ability only to have its use become irrelevant is incredibly frustrating. If the use of that ability is what effectively ends the threat of the combat, make sure you emphasize that in framing the end of the scene so that the player's agency is given its due.)

And, as I mentioned in that earlier essay, "All of these problems only get *worse* when the GM defines 'boring' as 'the PCs are winning,' while remaining fully engaged and excited as long as his bad guys have the upper hand."

With those words of caution in mind, though, the art of knowing when a combat encounter is effectively done (or, perhaps, when a combat encounter is done being effective) is a really important part of your skill set as a GM.

(For a wider discussion of how to effectively end scenes, see *The Art of Pacing*.)

The key thing is to make sure that the players feel ownership over what happens: That THEY were the ones who won the fight.

If in doubt, have the bad guys run away and let it play out. Player agency can persist through that decision, so you have a much wider margin of error.