



THE RIGHT WAY TO FUDGE

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We play dice with the universe. Our acts of creation happen in a game with rules that demand our imaginations stop and ask permission from a random number. The risk is part of the fun... Except, of course, when it isn't. At those times, the arbiters of all that exist must ask, as all beings of infinite power must, whether the rules of their world should be broken to keep things fun. So begins a furious maelstrom formed of the wrath of tabletop gods, arguing whether and when a die roll should ever be fudged.

Cataclysms aside, I'm not an expert at predicting how difficult an encounter will be for a party, but I do agree with most Game Mastering advice that encounters should be challenging for players at all times. So, instead of locking myself into arbitrating the

parameters of an encounter I imagined last week—worrying if the dice and the players will cooperate—I build encounters I know I can adjust as we play. For me, that's the right way to fudge.

When I call for a roll (or roll behind the screen) the players have made a choice and all the people around the table—myself included—are beholden to that roll. What I'm not beholden to is to my own plan. After the consequences of the player's actions are known, I'm not just free to adjust what's happening around them; I feel obligated to do so—if that's going to make a better encounter.





There's a real temptation to think of the encounter on the page as something real, and that deviating from the set map, enemies, statistics and strategies is cheating against the "reality" of the challenge. But just like writing a script, the first draft of a scene might not be the best. So I ask: does the fairness of our fantasy game depend on how rigidly a Game Master sticks to the version of the world he or she made up last week? Or does fairness come from respecting player agency, empowering them to make interesting choices they can play to the hilt?

Building an encounter is like writing a script with huge blank spaces wherever the main characters say or do anything. When a screenwriter thinks up what the characters do, the scene can be rewritten to match. When the characters (or the dice) surprise the table, why should a Game Master feel trapped in a half-written script? The real scene is being written at the table—right at that moment—with the players.

Correspondingly, the strategies below are about planning encounters with variations built in, so that you have tools to adjust the encounter as the players (and the dice) create with you.

PUT MORE STUFF ON STAGE

If you're directing a stage play, you want a set with props, levels and furniture to give actors choices. Conversely, give characters places to hide, take cover and snipe. Of course knowing the characters' abilities and the players' style of play will help you draft encounter spaces to match. In other words, the more on the map, the more choices you have for your monsters and NPCs, too.

It is important, also, to give characters ways to alter the space, even if it's as simple as a wooden table that can be flipped over to provide cover. Following what was said above,

the more there is to interact with on the map, the more choices players can imagine and the easier it will be for you, as result, to alter the challenge level of an encounter by shifting the enemies' action economy or tactics.

Some players are reluctant to burn actions interacting with the environment or moving tactically. A turn is a valuable resource and players want to contribute to defeating the enemy directly: that's what swords and spells are for! You can help validate interactions and tactics by playing up the cinematic and dramatic quality of those choices, and making sure the player's intentions have an in-game effect. In this sense, a good first step is to show your monsters benefiting from using the encounter space tactically and reacting to players' interactions with the map. Reward your players for their tactical play and they will play more tactically.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, the more complex the stage is the more control you have over the scene. Maybe the battle happens inside a house that is on fire during a blizzard. A cabinet inside might contain an explosive; when a wall burns through, the driving snow could blow in, obscuring vision. Maybe we're in a wizard's tower that is sinking into a malfunctioning teleport circle in the cellar. As it sinks, it could sway from side to side, calling for Dexterity checks or saving throws. When you need to disrupt the tactical situation, or add suspense, drama or distraction, an environmental change is a great tool.

Note the kinds of environmental changes you've built in. The wizard's tower might have a little table where you roll to find out how far it sinks each round. Even without the table, rolling dice creates drama. If a character goes down, and there's no hope of the party helping, a well-timed change to the environment could help the players regain the action economy or take advantage of a new tactical layout. Rolling the dice before you describe that change makes the action feel like part of the game—and not about you trying to "save" the character through a GM intervention.

GIVE 'EM MORE GOALS

It could be a dangerous trap or magical device that needs to be disabled in the middle of the fight. There could be a mission objective that doesn't depend on defeating enemies, like retrieving something fragile from the middle of the fracas. Maybe there are friendly NPCs present with different goals than the party. Maybe there are innocents or non-combatants caught in the middle.

Sometimes it's great to just kill monsters. But sometimes you want the challenge to be less about damage resistance and condition immunities, and more about choices. Does the hero in a story ever ask: "can I take that monster out in one round?" No, she asks herself questions of character. Does she run from the horde about to trample the trapped miner? Does she charge them to buy others time to rescue the miner, or risk taking an arrow by lifting the rock off the miner herself?

Consider our previous example about the wizard's sinking tower. An important item could be on a floor below the party, about to fall irrevocably into the portal. Encounters now have a goal with a ticking clock and other goals may conflict, like taking time to find the wizard's spellbook. You're in control of that ticking clock and, if you're careful, the players will never know you're fudging the timing instead of following a set pattern.

Also, you don't need huge set pieces to add extra goals; it could be as simple as letting a potion in a glass jar roll onto the floor. Players now have a new goal, if they deem it worth their time and effort: to save the potion from getting stomped on. You've also got now a simple way to change things up whenever you need it—a monster could kick the potion to the edge of a pit, after all.

WAVES OF ENEMIES

The easiest way to tweak encounter difficulty in my experience is to use waves of enemies, but it also carries the risk of negating player agency. A new wave of enemies always alters the tactical layout and, as long as they

started offstage, you can add or subtract a few. In this case, just don't make the players feel that they are wasting resources because you replace everything they defeat. If a wizard uses his only precious fireball to keep a swarm of poisonous insects from descending on his allies, it isn't respecting player agency to just add another swarm.

Even if the players scout or use magic to find out exactly how many enemies there are and how much power they have, always leave some of those away from the immediate encounter area, out of line-of-sight from the characters, so you can still reasonably speed or slow their entry on the battlefield on each round.

Always try to have an "in." Just like giving an NPC a way to escape so he or she can appear later in the plot, create ways to smuggle new enemies onto the field. Respect the players' ability to scout and plan, but situate your encounters in places that aren't easy to learn everything about. Your wiggle room isn't a cheat, it's a feature: a mystery for the players, one that builds tension and that they expect you to use for exactly what you need it for.

With waves of enemies, respect the characters' abilities and give players chances to avoid being surprised or outflanked. If there's a giant bug about to burst through the floor in the middle of a goblin battle, characters should have a chance to notice the furrowed ground or feel the tremors before the creature appears—and act accordingly. In this sense, preparing and deciding what to do with the new circumstances can be even more dramatic than being surprised.

Waves of enemies can also be used to reduce difficulty. If the goblins are about to crush the party, and worse, a new wave is coming, the current goblins could flee. Maybe in your original plan the different waves of goblins





were reluctant allies the party could trick into fighting each other but, with a little fudge, they're already enemies. When the first goblins flee, the characters get a chance to regroup or flee themselves. Two rounds later, the second wave of goblins arrive, and to make sure you aren't taking it easy on the players, it's twice as many. The reluctant allies' idea can even be salvaged by having the new, larger wave play it out. Will your players notice and try to turn them against each other? That's up to them. Will that strategy work? That's up to the dice.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT IS UP TO YOU

Successful Fudging Cheat Sheet

- ▶ Know what you can change and what you can't. As characters level up, know what is easy and what is hard for them to find out.
- ▶ Complexity is your friend. The more decisions you make and describe, the less any one decision will be suspected as a fudge "for" or "against" the players.
- ▶ Listen to the players. Whether in character or out, your players will let you know what they think is going on or what they'd like to happen. Listening to your players can help you turn a little fudge into an epic twist.
- ▶ It's not about negating bad rolls. The right way to fudge is all about giving the players opportunities to play. If the dwarf just went down to an unexpected critical hit—and you're worried the party can't recover—you don't have to play nice, but you have to be aware that the story of the encounter is now about the players finding a way to survive. You can still make it difficult, but ask yourself, if none of the other characters can possibly help the dwarf, what would a screenwriter do to keep the movie going? How can you keep the dwarf in dire peril, but give the players a chance, however slim, to make choices? Maybe the evil critter should just eat that

dwarf's face. Maybe it covets the new meat and wastes a turn intimidating the monster beside it. To keep things difficult, maybe it spends the next round dragging the dwarf to an alcove, out of reach of the party.

- ▶ Never fudge the dice results. The dice are the game. If you're going to change what the dice tell you, then why did you roll them? If there's a chance that the evil, charging ogre is going to kill the party wizard in this ambush, you need to decide if that's an outcome you'll accept before you have the ogre charge. If a key plot NPC unexpectedly fails an easy save against the player's spell, you could ignore the dice or fudge up a reason the NPC survives. Both of those are taking away the player's choices. Let the players have their moment, and then think about what you can really fudge. How can you reward the players' win and transfer the rest of the plot to another NPC in another encounter?
- ▶ Try not to admit how much you plan for variations. Some players may enjoy the spontaneity and the focus on their choices, but for many players, preserving the illusion that you aren't modifying things on the fly is important to their sense of accomplishment.

Finally, just remember: you're making all this up, so what's the difference between something you made up last week and something you're making up now? With the players at the table, you have more to work with. It's the same creative work you love—just like all the beautiful world-building you do for your players—but now you're just preparing your world to roll with the punches.

You don't have to fudge the rules or the dice, but you can fudge the challenges you've prepared to make them more interesting and more entertaining—right in the moment your players are playing them.

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