

BEHOLD MY TRUE FORM

CREATING EVOLVING BOSS MONSTERS

CREATING A SATISFYING BOSS fight is hard. How do you keep a climactic final combat from turning into a steamroll when the party gangs up on your solo monster and needles it until it dies three rounds later? Adding minions helps, but it doesn't always make sense in the story of your campaign. Giving your big, demonic monster more hit points helps, but that just protracts the grind without adding any extra tension—and the last thing you want to do is make your boss battle boring.

How do you make a boss fight harder while still raising the stakes?



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One option is to focus on story over combat. Storyteller GMs can use dialogue and roleplaying to heighten their encounters, and bosses with consequences built into the fight beyond living and dying—like the choice to sacrifice allies in order to defeat your enemy—can force players to think hard about their actions. The ability to force your characters to make tough, open-ended choices is one of the strengths of roleplaying games, and a good climax should be the highest-stakes roleplaying moment in addition to being the highest-stakes fight.

But surely there must be a way to make your boss fight dynamic using the actual mechanics of the game! Legendary actions and resistances help, but sometimes they're just not enough.

Enter the evolving enemy. Drawing inspiration from encounters in classic video games, creatures with the evolving subtype have tactics and powers that grow and shift as the battle progresses. As such, these creatures are best suited for worlds where magic is abundant, though certain evolving monsters are able to do so through purely biological means, like a monstrous snake shedding its skin to reveal an even more dangerous form underneath.

WHY AN EVOLVING CREATURE?

One of the most difficult parts of creating an engaging final encounter is maintaining player interest. Encounters that require the player characters to wale away interminably on a creature that never changes its tactics or its attacks can be wearisome. Evolving creatures change during an encounter—they have three phases, just as many satisfying stories have three acts. Evolving creatures change

forms or tactics in response to certain triggers during the encounter, typically when they are reduced to half maximum hit points and then again when reduced to 0 hit points.

Sometimes the change is dramatic and physical, like a dragon's spirit bursting from its physical form and attacking its killers as a vengeful spirit wyrm. Other times, the change is minor, like the creature's heavy armor falling off and its combat tactics changing to favor quick blows. No matter how the evolution occurs, the creature's new tactics create a difference in kind that will help you grab your players' attention.

Also, be aware that evolving creatures are not minions! They are tyrants, warlords, divine avatars, and the stuff of nightmares. An evolving creature should be the centerpiece of the encounter, narratively and mechanically. In mechanical terms, an evolving creature should have a challenge rating no lower than 5, and it should be the only creature opposing the player characters in that encounter.

CREATING AN EVOLVING CREATURE

Any creature can be turned into an evolving creature by increasing its hit points by 50 percent and giving it a "bloodied" trait and a "last stand" trait, chosen from the lists below. You can also create new traits to more accurately fit your particular evolving creature. Turning a creature into an evolving creature doesn't affect its challenge rating, but when calculating encounter difficulty and XP rewards, an encounter with an evolving creature is equal to fighting two consecutive encounters with a single creature of its challenge rating.

An evolving creature begins combat with no additional traits except for its increased hit points. When it is reduced to half its maximum hit points, its bloodied trait activates. This trait remains active even if it is healed above half its maximum hit points, but it loses this trait once it is fully healed or combat ends, whichever comes first. The attack that "bloodies" an evolving creature cannot reduce it below half its maximum hit points.

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When an evolving creature is reduced to 0 hit points, its last stand trait activates, usually reviving it with 1 hit point and incredible power. This trait remains active if it is healed above 1 hit point, but it loses this trait once it is fully healed or combat ends, whichever comes first. Once an evolved creature's last stand trait has been activated, reducing it to 0 hit points kills it or knocks it unconscious as usual.



BLOODIED TRAITS

These sample bloodied traits can be given to any evolving creature, but you can also create your own to better fit your unique evolving creature.

If a trait requires a creature to make a saving throw, it has the same DC as the evolving creature's other spells or traits. If it has no other traits that require saving throws, the DC is equal to 8 + half the creature's CR.

- **Bloodstained Spikes.** Blood-red spikes burst from the evolving creature's hide when it is reduced to half its maximum hit points. The creature's Armor Class increases by 2, and a creature that touches it or hits it with a melee attack while within 5 feet of it takes 5 (1d10) piercing damage. If the evolving creature has natural attacks, those attacks deal an additional 5 (1d10) piercing damage.
- **Bloody Celerity.** The evolving creature's armor falls away when it is reduced to half its maximum hit points, allowing it to act with incredible speed. It may immediately take an extra turn, even in the middle of another creature's turn. Its Armor Class decreases by 2, its speed increases by 10 feet, and it can make one extra attack per turn.
- **Bloody Sight.** When reduced to half its maximum hit points, all creatures that can see the evolving creature must immediately make a Constitution saving throw or become blinded for 1 minute. Blinded creatures may make new Constitution saving throws at the end of each of their turns. Additionally, each creature that can see the evolving creature takes 5 (1d10) psychic damage at the start of each of its turns.
- **Elemental Blood.** The evolving creature bleeds elemental power when it is reduced to half its maximum hit points. It gains immunity to one of the following damage types: acid, cold, fire, lightning, or thunder. Additionally, whenever the evolving creature it takes damage, all creatures within 30 feet of the evolved creature must make a Dexterity saving throw, taking 11 (2d10) damage of the chosen type, or half as much damage on a successful save.
- **Sanguine Hunger.** When reduced to half its maximum hit points, the evolving creature's teeth grow into massive fangs. Whenever the evolving creature deals damage with a bite attack, it deals an additional 11 (2d10) damage, and the evolving creature gains temporary hit points equal to the damage dealt. If the evolving creature does not have a bite attack, it gains one that deals damage equal to 2d10 plus its Strength modifier.
- **Storm of Blood.** A crimson storm rages around the evolving creature when it is reduced to half its maximum hit points. Whenever a creature or object casts a spell within 120 feet of the evolving creature, the spellcaster or the item's wielder takes 22 (4d10) psychic damage after casting the spell. Constitution saving throws made to maintain concentration are made with disadvantage within the aura. Creatures within 30 feet of the evolving creature are within the eye of the storm, and are unaffected.



LAST STAND TRAITS

These sample last stand traits can be given to any evolving creature, but you can also create your own to better fit your specific evolving creature.

If a trait requires a creature to make a saving throw, it has the same DC as the evolving creature's other spells or traits. If it has no other traits that require saving throws, the DC is equal to 8 + half the evolving creature's CR.

- **Desperate Possession.** When reduced to 0 hit points, the evolving creature instantly gains 1 hit point and can take an extra turn immediately. Then, its eyes go white. All creatures within 60 feet of the evolving creatures must make a Wisdom saving throw. If multiple creatures failed, only the creature with the lowest result is affected. On a failure, the evolving creature swaps minds and souls with the target. If the evolving creature's body is killed, it permanently gains control of its host body and the host body's spirit passes to the afterlife where it can be resurrected as normal. If the host body is killed, both creatures die and the possessed character becomes a ghost until its body is resurrected.
- **Spirit Form.** When reduced to 0 hit points, the evolving creature dies. On its next turn,

a spectral form rises from its corpse with the undead type instead of the creature's original type. This spectral form has 50 hit points and is resistant to acid, fire, lightning, thunder, bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks, and is immune to cold, necrotic, and poison damage.

It has all the attacks and traits it had in life. It is also incorporeal and can move through other creatures and objects as if they were difficult terrain. It takes 5 (1d10) force damage if it ends its turn inside an object.

- **Storm of Fury.** When reduced to 0 hit points, the evolving creature is surrounded by a sphere of howling wind. It instantly gains 1 hit point and can take an extra turn immediately. All creatures within 60 feet of the evolving creature must make a Dexterity saving throw as lightning explodes from the evolving creature's body, taking 33 (6d10) lightning damage or half as much damage on a successful save. The evolving creature gains a fly speed of 60 feet, has half cover against all attacks, and ranged attacks automatically miss (except on a natural 20).

Additionally, the evolving creature can cast *lightning bolt* at will as a bonus action.

SAMPLE EVOLVING CREATURE: GRAXORRA THE SOULSCOURGE

This sample creature is a young black dragon adapted into an evolving creature. Encountering Graxorra counts as encountering two consecutive challenge rating 7 creatures for the purposes of encounter difficulty and XP rewards.

Graxorra the Soulscourage

Large dragon (evolving), chaotic evil

Armor Class 18 (natural armor)

Hit Points 190 (15d10 + 45 + 63)

Speed 40 ft., fly 80 ft., swim 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
19 (+4)	14 (+2)	17 (+3)	12 (+1)	11 (+0)	15 (+2)

Saving Throws DEX +5, CON +6, WIS +3, CHA +5

Skills Perception +6, Stealth +5

Damage Immunities acid

Senses blindsight 30ft., darkvision 120ft., passive Perception 16

Languages Common, Draconic

Challenge 7 (2,900 XP, doubled)

Amphibious. Graxorra can breathe air and water.

Bloodstained Spikes. When reduced to half her maximum hit points, blood-red spikes burst from Graxorra's hide. Her Armor Class increases to 20, and a creature that touches her or hits her with a melee attack while within 5 feet of her takes 5 (1d10) piercing damage. Her bite and claw attacks deal an additional 5 (1d10) piercing damage (included below).

Spirit Form. When reduced to 0 hit points, Graxorra dies. On her next turn, a spectral form rises from her corpse with the undead type instead of the dragon type. Her spectral form has 50 hit points and is resistant to acid, fire, lightning, thunder, bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing damage from nonmagical attacks, and is immune to cold, necrotic, and poison damage.

She has all the attacks and traits she had in life. She is also incorporeal and can move through other creatures and objects as if they were difficult terrain. She takes 5 (1d10) force damage if she ends her turn inside an object.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Graxorra makes three attacks: one with her bite and two with her claws.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 15 (2d10 + 4) piercing damage plus 4 (1d8) acid damage. When bloodied, plus 5 (1d10) piercing damage.

Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 11 (2d6 + 4) slashing damage. When bloodied, plus 5 (1d10) piercing damage. 🐾

