I’ve been thinking about is burst vs situational vs baseline abilities. Specifically, I while I was analyzing the D&D 5th Edition Fighter vs the 5th Edition Barbarian I noticed at relatively low level, the raging Barbarian can gain resistance if not outright immunity to nonmagical slashing/piercing/bludgeoning damage. This means that –in a toe to toe battle- a fighter who had not gained a magic weapon literally couldn’t hurt the barbarian. But rage is finite resource so a fighter that smartly avoided the barbarian for a minute (or a fighter that came across a barbarian who had previously expended her rage in other battles) would have an advantage. And this is one of the great design conceits of traditional fighters; while other classes might outperform on the battlefield situationally (rogue sneak attack) or as a burst (barbarian rage) the fighter (and more specifically, the champion fighter in 5e) will be as effective with the same amount of options\abilities to threaten after twenty fights as he was during the first one (assuming they can recover their HP, which is their only limited resource). A lot of developers have stated that straining party resources is good game design; if parties can count on having plenty of prep time for a single encounter each day, then there is no real time for the ‘baseline better’ characters to shine.

I like the concept of one character being baseline superior at something with the other characters being situationally better\better temporarily due to them expending scarce resources aka ‘Burst Better.’ D&D provides ‘burst better’ most obviously in the form of spells; a properly buffed spellcaster might well be able to outfight a fighter, out-sneak a rogue, or out-talk a silver tongued bard. Though to do this would most probably mean removing their other options for later, which makes a compelling character choice.

To illustrate, imagine an extremely simple game where every character can do1 point of damage per attack. The special ability of fighters is to do an additional +1 damage on every attack. Clerics can call upon divine power to gain +4 to one attack once a day. Rogues gain +4 damage to an attack when the fast moving sun goes into eclipse. If a character expects to need to make 4 attacks a day, the fighter and the cleric are ‘balanced.’ If a character can expect to make four attacks a day (and there’s a 25% chance that an eclipse will be happening during any given attack) then the fighter, the cleric, and the rogue are all balanced. Of course, this doesn’t take into account the relative utility of being able to \*choose\* when the bonus occurs for the cleric, or the potential excitement of randomization for the rogue. Also enemy statistics change balance; if a character will only ever face enemies that require 2 damage to defeat then that tilts things in favor of the fighter while higher hp enemies tilt things in favor of the cleric. You can further modify this by giving constrains to the burst power (the cleric must forgo an attack to pray in anticipation of his blessing).

But what I think is \*most\* interesting mechanically is looking at the games outside combat and rearranging who is baseline-situationally-burst better; for instance, maybe characters have a minimum of one persuasion point when talking to NPCs, but rogues get an additional +1 on every conversation, fighters can intimidate to gain a +4 on one conversation a day (doing more gets them arrested) while clerics gain +4 when dealing with someone of their same religion (for which there’s a 25% chance). Or, you can delink special abilities from character builds entirely; for instance within the cypher system –via the eponymous ‘cyphers’- individual characters will often have situational boosts\the ability to solve problems.

Traditionally, ‘situationally’ better have been covered by sneak attack + favored enemies which can make rogues + rangers ‘better’ at melee combat. The options for situationally better at social and skill challenges are more limited but well worth considering. 5e does a good job of suggesting social ‘situational’ advantages; namely that depending on your character’s background you automatically have an immediate ‘in’ with a certain segment of the population (a folk hero cleric might receive a more welcome response from the peasants than the normally, supernaturally charming warlock say). But I think there is a lot to be done to find ‘situationally better’ moments in other skill challenges.

For instance, despite his relatively low stealth score a disguised fighter would be better at infiltrating the enemy army’s camp because his stature and bearing are more properly those of a soldier. Maybe, despite a ranger’s natural aptitude for tracking it’s actually the party wizard who will be better able to track the xen-beast because he studied one at the college. Fate does a good job of this sort of thing via the invocation of aspects (and other systems have similar mechanisms) but I would love to see more work done in this with regards to more crunch heavy systems.

As always, all of this can be done via ‘rulings’ (ie, hulking –but low charisma half-orc fighter- is better at intimidating people than the foppish, Halfling bard) but as a game designer I think the rules should be setup in such a way that the GMs have as little need to go against them as possible. And once I settled on the framework ‘Baseline Better – Situationally Better – Burst Better’ it made everything make a little more sense, and something that I’ll be more heavily relying upon in game design moving forward.