



## GM's Workshop

# Combat and Narrative

*Advice for maintaining narrative tension when the  
swords come out.*



***Narrative? Tension?***

*For the purposes of this article narrative refers to the story line that comes about naturally in the course of play, and not any sort of pre-planned plot or storyline. In a sense it is what can be looked back on after play as the thread from the start of the session to the end.*

*Narrative tension is the sense among the players (or audience) of pressure building, which can lead to fun and excitement when that pressure is released. Being mindful and controlling that tension can be an important part of making your sessions memorable. Leaving unresolved tension on the table is unproductive, however, and can easily turn a game into a stressful slog.*

*Both narrative and narrative tension are natural parts of the roleplaying experience that come about as a result of the rules and the natural pattern of challenge and reward. So whether you pay attention to them or not they're going on anyway.*

*To learn more about this concept you might find it interesting to look into narrative tension as it pertains to writing stories or as it pertains to speech performance in improv, stand up comedy, or oration.*

“Now it is a strange thing, but things that are good to have and days that are good to spend are soon told about, and not much to listen to; while things that are uncomfortable, palpitating, and even gruesome, may make a good tale, and take a deal of telling anyway.”

– J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit or There and Back Again*

A notion among some role-players is that combat and roleplaying are two opposing aspects of the game, and there are some that prefer one to the other. Combat is referred to as a strategy or min-maxer sort of subsystem that gets in the way of the actual role-playing. While this isn't a universal opinion, it certainly exists as a trope within the community.

In my personal opinion (and I am by no means any sort of authority on the matter), I feel that combat should be not only part of the role-playing narrative but one of the most dramatic and climactic parts of it. What often happens is that because the sub-system of combat is a bit different than the other parts of the game and quite a bit more structured it is very easy for the narrative thread to stop or get knocked off track and only resume once the last monster is slain.

And so for those that seem to get more of their fun from the story or the verisimilitude that comes from the suspension of disbelief those parts of the game are what happens between the fun.

I firmly believe that in this situation you can have your cake and eat it too.

We're going to go over a few different topics that touch on ways that can keep your narrative thread on track when combat starts and run it through till it ends. Not only that, but the ways in which you can start making what are some of the most exciting parts of books and movies into some of the most exciting parts of your session.

## Use Your Narrator's Voice

One thing that will help you right off of the bat is simply being aware of something that you are doing already - you are as the Game Master using a number of different "voices". This isn't in reference to you role-playing different NPCs, but rather that when you are narrating a scene, acting as an NPC, explaining a rule, answering questions, etc. you are using different "modes" of communication without even thinking about it.

This modality is actually something everyone experiences all day long as they go into and out of the different roles they occupy in their lives. As a parent, a co-worker, a friend, a lover, etc. Every role you are in during a given interaction dictates a lot of things like voice volume, confidence, body language, and all sorts of passive things that goes into communication. Most of us don't pay attention to it - however being mindful of this psychological process can be very useful in gaining more control over certain aspects of the way you interact with people. Which, of course, can be used for high brow things like trying to become better people and all that but instead in this article the suggestion is to use it play pretend dragon games better.

The voice we're focusing on here is the narrator's voice. This is the voice that sets the scene, describes the situation, and sets the ball up on the tee for the players to swat at. It should also be the voice that the players are most likely to pay attention to, the one with the gravity of importance because it is literally creating the world before their eyes.

That might seem a little overwrought, and it probably is.

The point is, you need to flex that voice a lot more in order to bring combat back onto the narrative track. It's not just for setting the scene, it's also for altering the scene. It's for describing within the narrative what just happened outside of the narrative when an action was declared and a dice was rolled.

To put it more plainly, as combat unfolds it is a good idea to continue your narration as you would in other parts of the game instead of leaving it to the dice and miniatures to show what is going on.

What might seem typical in a combat situation when you are using miniatures is a sort of hard transition from narrative to a turn-based tactical sub "game". Description might be sparse, and in the worst situations it devolves to "I attack, I move, I cast this spell" with silent intervals between broken only by the sound of dice or miniatures clicking across the table.

As the narrator it is your job to fill in the gaps around these cues. When a character rolls to attack and hits, describe the action. Sometimes you want to describe it contextually, or sometimes you simply want to note what is happening in simple terms so as to not affect the pace of combat. You never want to grind play to a halt to give a monologue

about a sword cut. However you should always be trying to make sure that sword cut exists in the narrative and not only as a die roll and math on paper.

The best way to keep up narration and pacing is to do a lot of your narration while other things are happening. This requires multi-tasking, but it also strings things together into a narrative thread. As the player rolls their attack, describe the attack. If they hit, describe the hit; if they miss, describe that. As a narrator you are bouncing off of the mechanics, and your stream of narration is giving you the control stick of the pacing. Just make sure that your descriptions aren't slowing down the game.

Examples of attack descriptions you can use as they roll their dice:

Some simple ones (more of these):

“You swing your axe.”

“You thrust your blade.”

“You cleave with your greatsword.”

Some with more detail (less of these, use as a seasoning):

“You swing your axe in from the side.”

“You thrust forward with your blade, trying to get under their shield.”

“You cleave your greatsword down in a powerful blow.”

And then in response to misses:

“-but the orc easily parries.”

“-but they block it with their shield.”

“-and the wight catches the thrust on their shield.”

“-the goblin dodges out of the way.”

“-your swing cuts only empty air.”

And in response to hits and doing damage:

“-and you batter them back.”

“-and it bites deep into their arm.”

“-and the weapon connects.”

“-and the sword hits.”

“-and the blade crushes through their defenses, splitting the helm and crushing their skull like a melon.”

As far as describing damage, it's important to remember that hit points and damage are an abstract concept that represents physical injury as well as energy, stamina, morale, and fighting spirit. Not every hit should be a cut. Sometimes you should describe a weapon battering against their armor or helm. Sometimes they're giving bruises, nicks, or causing the opponent to expend energy to avoid a true injury.

Deciding on how to narrate an action should be an intuitive process. If you're keeping your finger on the pulse of your pacing, you'll know when to throw in a little more detail. Essentially keep the beat going, and when the moment is right throw in a little flourish. These little flourishes can serve to release a little bit of the tension you are building up with the narration and pace - providing a little hit of satisfaction so you can keep building tension without it translating into stress.

For example:

Player: I move here and attack. (*Rolls a die.*) Does a 17 hit?

DM: It does! What did you attack with?

Player: My longsword. I do... (*Rolls a die.*) 7 total damage.

DM: You thrust your blade low, below the orc's clumsy parry, and skewer him through the belly. He lies slain at your feet.

Or, a quicker narration:

DM: Your blade pierces him through the belly.

The first description relieves more tension, the simpler one however keeps up the pace if you feel that the moment isn't right.

Or:

Player: I cast magic missile. (*Rolls dice.*) 9 damage.

DM: The shambling mound is pelted with your bolts of energy, and holds a large arm over its face as it steps back to try and ward them off.

Again, this one is more descriptive and shouldn't be the level of detail every turn - but throwing that in there at the right time provides a little bit of tension relief and paints a quick picture that helps to make the combat more immersive. Use such description to highlight cool, fun, or dramatic moments.

Another way to highlight such moments is to throw in after-the-fact narrative based on a sequence of actions. Instead of keeping up the stream of narrative, you opt to describe a chunk of the action after the fact. Again, as a highlight and not as a constant. Let the pacing guide you.

For example, a player's Fighter PC is attacked by an orc captain after the orc captain moves to engage them in melee. The orc misses, and on

the fighter's turn they miss their first attack but use their Action Surge ability to attempt another attack. This attack is a critical and they kill the orc captain.

You might narrate this after the fact thus:

“The orc captain charged you with a guttural cry, leaping the distance with his axe held high but you were able to move just enough to avoid it. You swing with your own weapon, which the orc captain parries with the haft of his axe, but his parry was too wide and left an opening for a powerful forward thrust that pierces through armor and bone, killing him outright.”

Sometimes keeping an eye on the mechanics happening at the table can provide you with a sequence that can, if narrated properly, make the battle feel much more visceral and interactive than the segmented turn by turn blow by blow of the actual sequence of play. It's another tool in your narrative toolbox to be used sparingly and to good effect.

## Play Off of the Players

In addition to narrating the action, a good way to draw the players into the immersion is to play off of them as well as the mechanics. While keeping up the pace, asking the right questions peppered into the narrative can create a sort of rhythm and even get them to narrate their own actions (as they would in a non-combat situation) to some extent. They become invested in the narrative because they're helping to shape it.

This call-and-response can really create a magical transformation around the table.

To transition into this, start simple. Don't just tell your players to describe their attack, you have to give them something to play off of. Give them the start of a statement to finish, ask an easily answered question - think of it like throwing an easy to hit pitch.

When a monster misses them, ask them what their character did to avoid the attack. A parry? A dodge? Did the attack glance uselessly off of their armor? You can use your answer to continue the narrative on their turn; if they parried and then attacked you can describe the character parrying with their sword and sliding the sword up the spear with expert precision, turning that parry into an attack.

It's generally better for this question to have definite choices instead of being open ended. Instead of, "How did you avoid their axe swing?" ask "Did your block the axe or did the hit glance off of your armor?"

As they get used to this, on their turn when they do an action ask quick questions about how it looks or how a character achieves something. Before they attack, ask them what they're doing with their weapon (a thrust? A swing? A downward slash?) and then finish the narrative beat when they hit or miss (your thrust is parried, your swing cleaves through their shield and arm, their attempt to block your powerful downward strike fails and you break through weapon, helm, and skull.)

Yet again, it shouldn't be over-described. Don't get lost in your narration and don't let the players get lost in theirs. Combat is visceral and blunt, so avoid a lot of purple prose in favor of short and to the

point questions and narration -so that when you do throw out a flourish it is highlighted and made to seem more important.

And remember that having the pacing stop is worse than leaving a single attack undescribed. Quick things like “you swing and miss” or “your axe hits” are better than silence *or* the repetitive “I attack. I hit. I attack. I miss.”

Successfully playing off of the players while keeping pace does require the players to be reasonably familiar with their own actions, abilities, and spells. Asking them to describe a spell they cast only to have everything stop so they can crack open a PHB is the opposite of what we’re going for here, so make sure you’re conveying to your players how important it is that they take a little bit of time to familiarize themselves with their abilities.

One way to help with this is during leveling. If you level up your PCs at the table instead of between sessions, having a round robin and asking each player to talk about what abilities they’ve gained can get everyone passingly familiar with each other’s abilities as well as provide a way to bring the party a little closer.

## Control the Pace

As the Game Master the pace of the game is largely in your hands. Since you are both the main narrator and the referee you are the one who should always have their hand on the gear shift. You should authoritatively resolve things quickly in the midst of combat. Arbitrate decisively, even if it means going back later to look a rule up. Because

you do not want to waste a lot of time looking up fiddly rules in the midst of the narrative.

The reason it is so important that you be the one in control of the pace is because if you do not control it, no one will, and the pace will ebb and flow at random as each player (and you) fall into your own paces unconsciously. However, if you are mindful of the pace as an active thing, you will bring everyone further in line with the pace you set.

This is, of course, the basic way the rulebooks describe the relationship of the DM and the Players to the game: the DM describes, the Players declare their reaction, and the DM then arbitrates that reaction (calling for rolls or asking clarifications) and describes what happens. This should be happening outside of combat and inside of combat. As a DM you should be busy every single turn, not just on “your” turn, or rather the NPC’s turns.

In addition, pace itself can be a tool to heighten tension or raise the stakes of the situation. If you begin to quicken the pace at which you narrate, move miniatures, and make calls during a heated part of the battle you might be able to manifest more immersion into the situation.

Part of maintaining control of the pace is, of course, maintaining the narrative as mentioned above. Another part is being the person that calls on players to do their turn immediately after another player is done. Make sure you have a good initiative tracking system in place and make each turn a conversation. Call on a player, ask them what their character does, and adjudicate appropriately.

If you don't do this, and instead become another passive participant in the battle waiting your turn, you have no control over the pace and aren't keeping things in a state of flow.

## Know the Rules and Use Uncommon Ones

It's a fairly obvious tip, but knowing the ins and outs of the combat system and the rules in general will speed up gameplay and put more control in your hands. It also allows you to insert more edge cases and outliers into combat - strange or little known rules for uncommon situations to add a little surprise or twist.

The best example of this are in the different actions available. PCs tend to not use things like pushing or knocking prone unless it is part of a special ability. There's no reason you shouldn't use them whenever it feels appropriate, however. Designing encounter battlefields with various elevations combined with foes perfectly willing to knock someone back creates a whole new dynamic to the usual swing swing swing.

Knowing the ins and outs of the abilities of your NPCs and monsters, and being willing to use them to their full extent, will also help shape combat and add challenge for the PCs. Goblins, for instance, can use a minor action to disengage with a five foot step much like a Rogue. Which means you should be using that as soon as a big bad warrior tries to engage the front line to slip past them and go for the weaker looking (to the goblin's mind) enemies.

Look up some of the optional rules in the DMG for a good number of other options including flanking, facing, disarming, and various ways to tweak combat.

## The Enemies Have Minds and Goals

You can change the entire dynamic of your random encounters and planned encounters by making one simple change to your designs: give every group of foes a combat goal.

Realistically when two sides engage in conflict both have some kind of goal. Very rarely is this goal total annihilation of their foe. In the context of D&D, bandits and various monstrous humanoids like goblins probably are far more interested in getting in, getting loot, and getting out. If you run an encounter where the creatures you control want to steal or mug the party, that sets the tone of the battle entirely. Your creatures aren't going to waste time slitting the throat of a downed PC when they could be rifling their pockets, for instance. And as soon as it's clear that they're not going to achieve their goal - *the enemy should split*.

Ultimately a lot of D&D battles become dragged out deathmatches because the DM (or the PCs) don't even think about fleeing. Realistically, however, routing your enemy should happen a lot more than total decimation. Goblins and kobolds are cowards! Why would they fight to the last man like a troop of paladins?

A big part of this is getting in the head of the hostiles. What does a goblin want? How far will a goblin go? How easily do they break?

Again, most of the hostiles that'll conflict with the PCs are not going to be mindless automatons that keep coming until they finally die. This will also inform strategies on the battlefield. Wolves circle their enemies and attack weak points, for instance. Orc warriors fight to kill and will absolutely attack a felled foe to slaughter them utterly if nothing takes away their attention.

So when designing an encounter or a group of enemies, I believe an important first step is to determine what their goal is, and the next step should be how far are they willing to go to achieve it. Some of them WILL fight to the last, and some of them WILL be mindless and unflinching. Imagine throwing zombies at a party that have gotten used to their enemies fleeing from broken morale. Suddenly that encounter becomes much more significant -- and much scarier.

Having this goal in mind during the combat will serve the narrative and heap a layer of role-playing on top of your otherwise mechanics based decisions and reactions. Your wolves should act as wolves and not as tactical hobgoblins. Little things like making them afraid of fire can add a little depth to your beasts, for instance.

## Challenge Can Elevate Satisfaction

Perhaps the advice that could be the most contentious, I present this not as a law or truth but rather as a viewpoint to consider.

So far we've talked a lot about narrative tension and release as well as stress. One thing to think about in this particular way of looking at your

session is the idea that fun and satisfaction need not be constant, and that you can bank bigger bursts of that good stuff by being willing to make things a little difficult for your players.

There is a trope or stereotype common in the RPG community that refers to the “Killer DM”, that is a dungeon master that revels in hurting or killing PCs and sees themselves as an opponent rather than a referee.

This is not what I’m advocating here at all. Rather what I am suggesting is to use challenge and difficulty as a tool in your narrative toolbox, and to try to not let your PCs see you as a deus ex machina force that will save their characters from death in an artificial way.

It’s a psychological phenomena that gets talked about a lot in terms of delayed gratification and dealing with stress. Essentially that dealing with difficulty, challenge, and unpleasantness that leads to a release or a climax ramps up the amount of pleasure you get from that release. It’s why difficult games like Dark Souls or Dwarven Fortress seems to be so addictive to those that play them; it’s not because the difficult gameplay itself is so pleasurable, it’s that the gratification that follows the difficulty is ramped up to an extreme amount.

Much like a hunting or camping trip to an extreme environment is difficult and uncomfortable but the participants enjoy what is enjoyable far more. Being in cold and wet conditions followed by a warm fire or hot bath makes those things which are pleasant in any other circumstance stand out all the more.

What does this mean for your game? It means that the entire narrative thread need not be a constant drip of satisfaction to your players. It means that you can inject real hardship in there, mindfully, so that the release of completing the quest means a lot more.

Those who study creative writing are probably familiar with thinking about tension in narrative and why not to release it too early or too often. It's a commonly taught concept that new writers have difficulty allowing a difficult situation time to be left unresolved to create tension in a story, many times instead opting to create a conflict and then to resolve that conflict as quickly as possible. This is because in general we don't like discomfort, even writers who haven't trained themselves to be comfortable with discomfort for a little while. As a writer gains experience they learn how to let tension and conflict have room to breathe, to build, ultimately leading to more satisfaction or a more impactful release.

To make your game more difficult without seeming like an unfair DM can be a very difficult line to walk, however, especially if you play in groups that don't often play in such a style. --Not that this is a value judgement of styles of play that don't incorporate difficulty or challenge. Again, we're talking about another tool for your toolbox that might be fun for you and your players.

The most important factor to establish to prevent your players from thinking of you as an enemy when you start ramping up difficulty is to put in a framework that puts you firmly in the role of an impartial arbiter. This means giving up some of your usual control over certain aspects of the game.

- Roll your dice openly. By cutting out the idea that you are in control of the dice results it short circuits any attempt to blame rolls on you. Instead probability and chance are put in the driver's seat. (This also means that you should be a lot more mindful about what you want to leave to chance.) This also increases the difficulty right out of the gate as you can't fudge the results in the PCs favor.
- Give target numbers freely. DCs and ACs especially -- doing so gives your players a certain amount of certainty back in their court. It makes sense that someone is able to determine how hard something is to achieve in any case.
- Don't be tricky. Sometimes as DMs we get a little fun out of exploiting things like the players misremembering vital points of information, or we'll take a player at their word when they mispeak instead of clarifying. If you're going to be making your game more difficult it's important not to pull crap like this. There's nothing wrong with asking a player to clarify, to give the occasional reminder, or to be open about past events the PCs have taken part in.
- Don't be their savior. To flip the preceding point around, however, you also should try to avoid behaviors that put you squarely on their side. Don't make a lot of suggestions about how to handle something, don't breadcrumb to a ridiculous degree, don't artificially pull back the challenge in an obvious way.

Once you've established and adjusted to your new role as an objective arbiter you can begin ramping up the challenge of your game. The obvious ways to do this are simply to build tougher encounters, but there are other ways that also have the benefit of providing immersion.

- As mentioned above, exploit the abilities of the hostile monsters you run. Combine the mechanics with the narrative behaviors of the enemies you run and set goals and strategies. Goblins, wolves, kobolds, all of these have an ability or two that you should lean into instead of using once or twice. Always be disengaging as a goblin. Always be flanking as a kobold.
- Sometimes certain enemies will go in for the kill. Becoming unconscious is not a get out of danger free card - it should be scary. Not everyone is a cold blooded killer, of course, but those enemies that are should be played that way. A beast like an owl bear or a wolf whose goal is prey? When they take down a PC, if no immediate danger distracts them, have them go in for that hit that automatically makes the PC fail a death save -- and watch the party scramble to save their fallen comrade instead of leaving them there without a thought.
- Successful skill rolls shouldn't paint the whole picture. Instead of locking certain things behind one successful skill roll, design hidden objects, traps, and other skill challenges in a structure. A hidden compartment under the bed? A perception check will spot a clue like a scratch in the floorboards, but it won't give away the whole game. Now the PCs will mess with the bed, or screw with the floorboards. This increases the difficulty but it also gives the PCs more satisfaction. Instead of having a heavy portcullis just need an athletics check, have the PC roll an athletics check to see if they can lift it, then roll a constitution saving throw to see how long they can leave it lifted before gaining a level of exhaustion. Persuasion in particular should be a series of rolls instead of one lucky roll unlocking everything the PCs need from someone. Break down the information or the

help the PCs can get from someone into a number of things and have each of these things require a roll *or* reward an extra one for good role playing.

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