

STAR WARS®

ROLEPLAYING GAME

SAGA EDITION WEB ENHANCEMENT 2 ENCOUNTER DESIGN 101

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Designing fresh, exciting, and (most importantly) fair encounters for Star Wars Roleplaying Game heroes can be one of the greatest challenges for a Gamemaster. In many ways, encounter design and balance are more art than science. Despite the organized and numeric nature of the rules, sometimes factors outside of the raw statistics can alter the difficulty or fun of the encounter. For example, a Gamemaster might design an encounter that would be perfectly appropriate for most parties, but since her players have just the right mixture of talents, feats, and tactics, the encounter is over too quickly -- either in the heroes' favor, or to their dismay.

The Saga Edition Core Rulebook presents some very basic guidelines on encounter design. However, to encourage Gamemasters to create more dynamic and exciting encounters, this article walks through the steps for building an encounter from start to finish. The guidelines in this web enhancement should help you create interesting and fair encounters, though of course each GM must consider the composition of the adventuring party.

STEP 1: DETERMINE OPPONENTS

The most significant and most difficult part of designing an encounter is choosing the enemies that the heroes will face. Every character, creature, droid, and vehicle includes a Challenge Level (CL) that indicates how tough that challenge can be. In many cases, CL is not assigned through any

specific formula; determining CL can often be a matter of testing the challenge to gauge its difficulty). However, CL gives a good starting point for designing an encounter. An opponent of a given CL is considered to be a challenge for four heroic characters of that level; thus, a CL 1 stormtrooper is a challenge for four 1st-level characters.

As stated in the core rulebook, encounters with four to six enemies work best for most encounters. This gives the heroes enough targets to feel like each member of the group is participating while not overwhelming them. To



remain an appropriate challenge, the main opponents in the fight should have a CL that is 1 or 2 points lower than the average party level. For most encounters, the enemies should be weaker than the heroes but should still be enough of a threat that the heroes will feel challenged by the encounter. Star Wars differs from many other roleplaying games, though, in that it's often perfectly acceptable to litter the battlefield with enemies who are far outclassed by the heroes. This will be covered in more detail in Step 3, but when determining encounter difficulty, you should focus only on those enemies whose CL is within 5 levels of the average party level.

To determine whether or not the CLs you have chosen for your encounter are appropriate, add all the CLs together and divide by 3. If this result is within one level of the average party level, and no single enemy is of a higher CL than the average party level minus 1, you've probably created a good challenge. Remember, though, that for single opponents, an appropriate encounter is with an enemy of CL equal to the average party level.

Mixing Challenge Levels

Not every enemy in an encounter has to be a difficult challenge for the heroes. It is acceptable, and even encouraged in many cases, to have a portion of the opposition be weaker than other opponents. These weaker enemies might act as "support" for the primary opponents, using the aid another action to enhance attack rolls, or affecting the battlefield in some indirect way. Alternatively, they might just be there to slow the heroes down long enough for the main enemies to make their move. Regardless of their function, these lower-CL enemies can still hurt the heroes, but they are secondary concerns after the primary enemies.

Additionally, mixing Challenge Levels is a great way to keep the heroes guessing. If one enemy has a high attack bonus and high damage, the heroes might assume that they all do, encouraging the group to be more cautious (even though that caution may be unwarranted). Similarly, heroes that drop an enemy of a lower CL quickly might become reckless, making them enticing targets for more threatening foes. A good mix of Challenge Levels can add diversity to a fight in a subtle but effective way.

Choosing Diverse Enemies

The process of picking appropriately interesting enemies is just as important as picking appropriately challenging enemies. When designing an encounter, pull enemies from different classes, different species, and even different types. Mixing characters, creatures, droids, and vehicles is a great way to create more interesting encounters precisely because they require different tactics. Droids and vehicles are immune to ion damage, creatures can't be negotiated with, vehicles move at high rates of speed, and characters have a diverse array of talents and feats. Though each layer of enemy diversity adds more work for the Gamemaster, they also make for more exciting and tactically engaging encounters.

For example, the classic "squad of stormtroopers" encounter is a favorite in Star Wars adventures. However, so much more can be done with the encounter to make it more exciting. Instead of six stormtroopers, we might use four stormtroopers, an Imperial officer, and two Imperial probe droids. Instead of five human thugs starting a cantina fight, the encounter might be three human thugs, the Twi'lek bartender, and the cantina's "pet," a nek battle dog. Even within members of the same species, class diversity can make a big difference. A single noble with a few soldiers makes a potent combination, and one that produces an interesting combat dynamic during the encounter.

Mixing in vehicles can be a bit more challenging, due largely to their increased firepower and toughness. For this reason, most vehicles are higher on the CL scale. However, speeder bikes and landspeeders (many of which have weapons comparable to those carried by characters) can live up the battlefield without tilting the balance of the encounter too much. A group of dark Force adepts might be made into a more interesting encounter if it were two dark side marauders, a dark Force adept, and three of their human thralls riding around the battlefield on speeder bikes.

Regardless of the exact combinations, diversity is usually more engaging than uniformity when it comes to primary enemies. A good rule of thumb when diversifying opponents is to choose one type of opponent as the base enemy, choose a second type of opponent that is separated from the base enemy by a minor difference (such as species or class), and then choose a third type of opponent that is separated from the base enemy by a major difference (such as by type: droid, creature, or vehicle).

Altering Challenge Through Gear



One aspect of picking your enemies that can often be overlooked is the effect of weapons and equipment on an individual opponent. A CL 1 storm-

trooper typically carries a blaster rifle and other basic accoutrements. However, if you put an E-Web blaster cannon in the hands of that stormtrooper, he suddenly becomes a much more potent enemy, even though technically his Challenge Level remains unchanged. Since equipment and wealth are not balancing factors in determining Challenge Level for most enemies, Gamemasters should be careful when handing out powerful equipment. It can quickly increase the challenge out of proportion with the Challenge Level.

By the same token, adding weapons or equipment to an opponent is an excellent way to add diversity to an encounter. If every stormtrooper in the encounter has a rifle, they all act the same way and use the same tactics. If, however, one stormtrooper is firing an E-Web, this changes that opponent's behavior and encourages the heroes to change theirs as well. Likewise, if the Gamemaster puts a grenade launcher or a flamethrower in the hands of one of the stormtroopers, the fight becomes very different indeed. A standard bounty hunter might be tough, but when outfitted with the kinds of weapons and armor worn by Boba Fett, the enemy becomes much more challenging.

In general, equipment should not increase the CL of an individual opponent. However, if the equipment significantly raises the enemy's attack bonus, damage, or Reflex Defense, it might be appropriate to increase the CL as well. As a guideline, if a piece of equipment increases any of these aspects of the character by 50%, increase the opponent's Challenge Level by +1. For example, a normal stormtrooper deals 3d8 points of damage with a blaster rifle (an average of 13.5 points). If that stormtrooper begins using an E-Web that deals 3d12 points of damage (an average of 19.5 points), that change normally wouldn't justify increasing the CL. However, the weapon creates an area attack (which not only strikes multiple opponents but also deals half damage even on a miss), and that probably is enough to warrant a higher CL.

STEP 2: DETERMINE LOCALE

Though the general locale of the encounter will likely be determined by the demands of the adventure, choosing an appropriate setting can go a long way toward excitement. Very few encounters in Star Wars take place in an empty room or on a wide-open plain with no visible terrain or obstacles. Instead, they take place in cramped hallways in Imperial detention centers, around massive open-air catwalks and endless chasms, and on assembly lines deep within droid construction facilities.

Usually, interesting encounter locales are irregular in shape, with alcoves, short hallways, and protruding walls. A locale can encompass several rooms, and a single encounter might be designed to flow from one room to another. Perhaps an explosive charge collapses a wall, allowing reinforcements to arrive from the far side and increasing the challenge. Indoor locales usually have stairs, catwalks, turbolifts, or other means of moving

between altitudes, as well as pits and chasms that must be avoided. Similarly, a good encounter locale gives the Gamemaster enough to describe without getting bogged down in details. By itself, a cargo bay isn't very exciting or memorable, but a cargo bay with a massive glass window overlooking a volcano planet, with electricity coursing through power couplings along one wall, is certainly more evocative.

For outdoor locales, terrain plays an even more important role. Difficult terrain requires tactical movement and can slow down heroes and enemies alike. Alien flora and fauna, a staple of the Star Wars universe, can add spice to any encounter. If your fight takes place on an ice planet, you can stage it on an open, snowy plain, or you can stage it on the edge of a cliff, above the canyon lair of a flesh-eating snow lizard. Likewise, if a battle takes place on a forest planet at night, you can evoke the alien nature of the world by having giant fireflies provide the only illumination. Even better, as the huge insects drift across the battlefield, they bring an interesting dynamic -- constantly shifting concealment -- to the fight itself.

Environmental Hazards

Locales bring with them certain hazards native to the environment. Most environmental hazards can be classified as conditional, partial, or total.



A conditional hazard is one that presents itself only if certain conditions are met. These conditions might require the heroes or their enemies to trigger the hazard. For example, anyone who passes through the security sensors triggers an alarm that slams a blast door closed. Alternatively, the hazard might be triggered by some other environmental effect. Perhaps when the blast door slams shut, it disrupts power to half the room, plunging it into darkness. Similarly, the condition that triggers the hazard might be a function of time. After 5 rounds, the ice at the edge of the cliff melts, sending anyone in a 2-square-wide line plummeting into the chasm below.

Additionally, conditional hazards may not be readily apparent to the heroes, and can come as a surprise in the middle of an encounter.

Partial hazards are usually visible to the heroes and are present throughout the duration of the encounter. These hazards can be avoided and may not affect every combatant. For example, the Sarlacc in the Great Pit of Carkoon acted as a partial hazard because while it was present throughout the fight, the heroes could avoid it by not falling off their skiff. Other examples of partial hazards include a room that's half underwater, a large swath of ground that's covered in jagged rocks or metal, or a stretch of floor plating that's charged with electricity.



A total hazard is one that is present throughout the encounter and unavoidable, such as a room filled with dioxis or a completely flooded chamber. Total hazards usually impede (or damage) the heroes every round and can seriously affect the encounter. Gamemasters should be careful with total hazards because they can quickly lead to the death of one or more characters -- or perhaps the entire party.

When introducing an environmental hazard, adjust the encounter to accommodate the increased challenge. Assuming that the hazard has attack bonuses and damage outputs on par with enemies of the appropriate CL, adding a hazard to an encounter is just like adding another opponent. If the hazard is conditional, consider it to be another "opponent" with a CL equal to the equivalent enemy CL minus 2. If the hazard is partial, consider it to be another "opponent" with a CL equal to the equivalent enemy CL minus 1. If the hazard is total, consider it to be another "opponent" with a CL equal to the equivalent enemy CL.

For example, let's say the hazard is a poison gas cloud. The gas attacks a target's Fortitude Defense with an attack bonus of +6 (the equivalent of about a CL 5 enemy) and deals 2d10 points of damage each round the gas is

inhaled. If the gas is present only when a hero enters an incorrect command code, the hazard is conditional; treat it as a CL 3 enemy. If the gas is always in the room, but the cloud covers only the computer stations, the hazard is partial; treat it as a CL 4 enemy. If the entire room is filled with gas, the hazard is total and would be considered a CL 5 enemy.

In any case, when you're determining the fairness of an encounter, be sure to include an environmental hazard's CL in the calculations.

STEP 3: DETERMINE OBSTACLES AND OTHER CHALLENGES

Lastly, anything else that can act as an impediment to the heroes should be added to the encounter. Though many obstacles are environmental hazards, you can complicate an encounter in other interesting ways. For example, a construction droid that swings a hanging girder through the battlefield every other round certainly alters the fight. The droid is not an environmental hazard because it can be disabled, but it's not really an opponent, either, so you need not consider its CL when determining the fairness of the encounter.

Reverse Engineering

One good way to determine if obstacles are needed for an encounter is to use the reverse engineering method. First, picture the room where the fight will take place, empty it of obstacles, and imagine the foes inside. Now imagine that the fight begins; what do the heroes do? What are their actions, assuming they win initiative and act first? Based on those assumptions, find ways to make those actions more difficult. Repeat the process until you're satisfied that the encounter provides enough of a challenge to the heroes.

For example, let's say an encounter pits the heroes against four storm-troopers, an Imperial officer, and two probe droids. Place the enemies in an empty room and begin the reverse engineering process. The Jedi hero will likely move into the room and use Force slam on the squad of storm-troopers, so you decide to put two of them on a platform that is 3 meters tall, meaning that the Force slam can only get 2 of them at best. The scoundrel will probably try to sneak up on the Imperial officer, so give that foe a hovering spotlight droid that tries to point out any heroes breaking off from the main group. The soldier carries ion grenades and ion weapons, so he'll probably try to take out the two probe droids. To complicate matters, spread the two droids far apart from each other, ensuring that a single ion grenade won't take them both out. With just a few small changes, a relatively mundane encounter has become more engaging and challenging for the heroes.

When using reverse engineering, it's important to remember that your goal is to challenge your heroes, not to stymie them. Star Wars is all about doing

amazing, heroic things in the heat of battle, and your players will want to do this as well. Obstacles should encourage them to make choices with their abilities, not keep them from using the abilities completely. Does the scoundrel go after the officer or the spotlight droid first? Which pair of stormtroopers does the Jedi use Force slam on? Which probe droid feels the heat of the soldier's ion barrage? The heroes still use their abilities in fun and exciting ways, but they have choices to make when doing so.

Low-Challenge Enemies as Hazards

Low-level enemies don't usually provide enough challenge for heroes. However, even at high levels, most players still want to kill stormtroopers and blow up battle droids. That's part of what makes a Star Wars game memorable. Instead of continually increasing the levels of stormtroopers, try using a handful of stormtroopers as an obstacle. An encounter with a single, high-level enemy might need to be enhanced to present a more cinematic scene, and adding a bunch of low-level goons to the fight does just that. The heroes will usually take time to stop and dispatch low-level enemies, even if they see them as little threat, and there's always a chance that a natural 20 will allow a thug to get off a lucky shot at a hero.

For example, a party of 10th-level heroes comes up against the Sith apprentice they have been pursuing for several adventures. The Gamemaster wants the Sith apprentice to be the focus of the encounter, but a four-on-one fight, even against a Sith, might be anticlimactic. To enhance the encounter, the Gamemaster adds a dozen low-level stormtroopers. They pose little direct threat to the heroes, but they're an obstacle that must be overcome on the way to defeating the real enemy. In addition, they give non-Jedi party members something to do while the Jedi engages the Sith apprentice in a climactic duel. A similar situation occurred in the Battle of Geonosis, when Mace Windu ran straight for Jango Fett while others focused on taking out the droids.



Providing Cover Spots

One important aspect of encounter design is providing enough spots for heroes and enemies to take cover during an encounter. Not only is cover important to many characters in the game, it also provides more Star Wars-

like combat experiences. Objects that provide cover -- such as crates, computers, and low walls -- also act as obstacles, encouraging creative movement throughout the terrain.

Spreading Out the Enemies

One of the fastest ways to get a group of opponents killed is to have them all bunched together. A quick grenade or a Force slam, and they'll be wounded, dead, or dying. Instead, try to spread at least some of the enemies out to avoid area attacks. It's fine (and encouraged) to have a group of battle droids march in formation so they can be taken out quickly, but if you want certain enemies to present a significant challenge, place them throughout the encounter area so that individual area attacks will be less effective -- at least in the first round or two.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Having walked through the process of designing an encounter, it's time to make up an encounter of our own. Let's assume that we have a party of 7th-level heroes playing in the Rebellion era, and we want to challenge the heroes while still making sure that they can survive the encounter. Since the heroes will be infiltrating an Imperial Detention Facility as a part of the adventure, we already know our setting. For our primary enemies, we pick two CL 5 Imperial Security Bureau agents (nonheroic 6/scout 3) and one CL 5 Imperial Officer (nonheroic 3/noble 3/officer 1) to represent the interrogation team. Additionally, the facility has a small complement of crab droid scouts (CL 3, nonheroic 9) leftover from the Clone Wars, one of which is guarding the area the heroes are attempting to infiltrate. Adding all the CLs together and dividing by 3, we get an encounter CL of 6, meaning we have the beginnings of an appropriate encounter.

However, we really want to challenge the party, so we spice up the battlefield with terrain effects and other hazards. The encounter will take place in a detention block, since the heroes are there to rescue an NPC that has helped them in the past. We decide that the detention block is equipped with emergency systems that spray a numbing gas into the room. We give the numbing gas an attack bonus of +5 against a character's Fortitude Defense (the equivalent of a CL 4 enemy), dealing 3d8 points of stun damage. But we also determine that the gas shoots out of the walls only around the edges of the room, making it a partial hazard and reducing the CL to 3. Added to the other CLs in the encounter, this gives us a new encounter CL of 7, which should be more challenging for the heroes.

Knowing that our heroes are fond of stunning enemies, the party is likely to charge in and try to get close to the officer and the ISB agents to use the stun settings on their blasters. To keep this from happening too quickly, we decide that barricades pop up to block the middle of the room, spaced at intervals of 3 squares. Thus, if the heroes want to get in close with the ISB agents, they'll have to move down the sides of the room, where the

numbing gas is spraying. The crab droid, unaffected by the gas or stun weapons, will range out toward the heroes, while the officer and ISB agents make attacks against the party from the back of the room.

In a matter of minutes, we've created an encounter that will challenge the

heroes and produce interesting combat situations. All that's left to do is determine the DC of the Use Computer check or Mechanics check needed to shut down the gas (giving tech-oriented heroes another way to contribute), and the encounter is ready to run.

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