

How to run Combat and keep your Players interested

There is a reason why most of us prefer WFRP's combat system to Rolemaster's. It is simple, quick and deadly. In fact, WFRP is probably the best compromise possible between realism and playability. And yet, as straightforward as it seems, running combat poses certain difficulties for a GM. First of all, combat remains the most time-consuming and rule-heavy part of role-playing, even in WFRP. Lots of characteristics, dice rolls and calculations are involved (just think of the rules for Strike to Stun), as well as keeping track of almost every second of game time and the positions and movement of several PCs and NPCs. Thus running a short skirmish between the PCs and a handful of skaven can easily consume half an hour of your playing time. On the other hand, your players may become bored by the sullen routine of attack rolls, dodges and critical hits, because WFRP's combat system does not seem to present many options. At worst, combat may become a mere game-within-the-game, consisting of dice rolls, maths and munchkin tactics, which has nothing to do with role-playing any more. As a GM, you want to avoid that. The aim of this article is to give you a few ideas of how to keep your players interested in combat.

Make Combat Rare and Deadly

First of all do not overuse combat. If you keep it rare, it will remain something special. One big fight per session is generally more than enough. To achieve that give your PCs opportunities to avoid any combat situation that is not vital to your scenario. If you keep your fights fair and deadly, sensible players will use those opportunities. Thus a second piece of advice is not to fudge dice rolls in favour of the PCs too often. Your players should always be aware of the fact that any hit scored by their opponents is potentially deadly. If combat is used as a last resort, the players' fear for their characters' lives will heighten their feeling of suspense during fights.

The Power Problem

With their experience increasing, however, PCs will of course become more self-confident. Players may come to trust their high stats and several layers of (magical) armour. Evidently, you should avoid characters becoming too powerful too soon. Yet campaigns tend to go on for years and thus PCs will inevitably become too powerful to care about a bunch of stinking gobbos. Increasing their opponents' stats may help, but it does not add to the realism of your campaign world if players realise that orks have miraculously become stronger or that the frequency of encounters with wyverns increases dramatically. You may, of course, send them on a special quest or into a different area to motivate such changes. Another possibility is to increase the number of opponents, but this tends to turn combat into an even more tedious dice-rolling extravaganza.

Make Your NPCs Smart

A better option than increasing stats or numbers is to make your PCs' opponents more intelligent. Many players are torn out of their usual fighting routine by an NPC who has and actually uses a Disarm skill. Very often, NPCs are much more familiar with the terrain on which the fighting takes place. Make them use their knowledge! Think of what strategy they would use when forced to defend their ground. Have NPCs cut through the ropes holding a chandelier, roll barrels down stairs or distract the PCs with a Sounds spell! Surprise your players by being creative about fighting and turn the weaknesses of their opponents into strengths. One of my players is traumatised ever since a handful of goblin sprogs in a greenskin kindergarten bit his third career character half dead, simply because they had started to climb up his breeches and bite through the straps of his breast plate.

Encourage Creativity

Such creative game play on the GM's part may in turn inspire your players to use their heads as well as their WS during combat. The possibilities for actual role-playing in combat are endless. Your PCs may want to use improvised weapons and cover, they may undertake risky manoeuvres to improve their fighting positions, they may try and trip, shove or grapple their opponents. If WFRP does not provide rules or skills for all of these actions that does not mean that they are not possible. In such cases the GM must decide what is plausible and what is not and ask for the appropriate test. If forced to choose between the rules and a player's creativity, always go for the latter - within the limits of a certain realism and balance. Do not let flic-flacs become an everyday sight, but neither look for the appropriate skill on his character sheet if a PC wants to pull a rug from under a thug's feet. Such encouragement of creative combat is very rewarding and makes combat much more interesting, most of all for characters whose stats and skills do not make them natural fighters. I have rarely seen one of my players happier than when she managed to disarm a prison guard using a chair.

Be Prepared

On the technical side there are a few play aids you may use to make running combat easier for you. Firstly prepare a sheet of paper with all relevant stats and skills for each combat encounter you are planning. Do not use too many different NPCs or monsters in one group, for that makes it more difficult for you to keep track of stats and wounds. As a rule of thumb, use a few creatures straight from the template in the rulebook and add one or two NPCs with different stats or weapons.

Use Miniatures

In order to visualise combat and to keep track of positions and movement more easily, it is advisable to use miniatures or counters. An easy and quick method to create the fighting terrain is to take a piece of cardboard marked with hex-grid, put some adhesive foil on it and use non-permanent markers to schematically draw the fighting environment. Do not go into too much detail, for this would only limit the players' creativity. Try not to digress into actual wargaming by enforcing strict rules on miniature movement and so on. The board is supposed to be nothing more than a visualisation aid and it is certainly not to become a board game in its own right. The players should not be encouraged to identify with a 30 mm figurine. However, using miniatures tends to avoid confusion about who is where and how many opponents are still up and standing.

By preparing well and using these little helpers you will be able to cope with the technical side of combat rather effortlessly. This leaves you with more time and energy to think of original and surprising moves on the part of your NPCs and monsters. What is more, you will be able to focus on dramatic descriptions of the fighting action, wounds, feigns, parries and critical hits. In one word, you will be able to role-play your fights.

Written by Markus Widmer