

DEFINING CHALLENGE LEVEL

While players and their characters will often surprise us, as DMs we often want to design for a specific challenge level. We may want a thrilling final encounter that pushes characters to their limits or a series of easy encounters that let players build confidence.

In this section, we provide the key factors that establish a particular challenge level. Using this criteria, we then provide an alternate definition of the easy, medium, hard, and deadly challenge levels used for encounter building.

WHAT DETERMINES CHALLENGE LEVEL?

KEY FACTORS

The following elements related to monster CR establish our challenge level:

Hits and Damage. Characters feel challenged the more often they are hit by attacks and the more damage they take from those hits. This is true even if the characters are not close to dying.

Resource Expenditure. When the challenge feels high, players will expend their character's resources to achieve victory or prevent defeat. Resources can be class features with a specified number of uses, magic items and consumables, spell slots, and other limited use capabilities.

Formidable Foes. Foes feel formidable when they seem to hit harder than usual, hit more easily than usual, have special tricks, control the battlefield, or are particularly well-suited to the encounter environment. This often translates to higher monster CR or how you apply the tips in this book. Even a fearsome description and roleplaying can make a foe formidable to the players and their characters.

Unconscious Characters. When a character is brought to 0 hit points, all of the players notice. The tenor of the encounter changes immediately, creating the feeling that the characters are losing, even if the heroes actually have the upper hand.

Ability to Press On. After the fight ends, do the heroes feel they can continue adventuring and face future encounters? Challenging encounters erode the confidence of the adventuring party and hasten when characters will take a short or even long rest (and therefore impacts the length of the adventuring day).

ADDITIONAL FACTORS NOT RELATED TO CR

The following factors aren't related to CR or the stated challenge level, but are nonetheless important to consider.

Tactics. Our tactical decisions impact the challenge. We may make the enemy wizard obvious at the start of combat, or begin with them hidden behind a secret door. We might attack the rear ranks, forcing melee characters to choose between reinforcing the rear or going after the wizard ahead.

Terrain. Does reaching the enemy caster require crossing a rickety rope bridge, or swinging across a chasm? Are

archers positioned far from the heroes and behind cover? We can use terrain to increase the challenge levels in ways that monster CR will fail to capture.

Goals. Our heroes may need to stop the cultists, but also save the captives. A shop owner trapped in a burning shop calls for help, distracting a hero from their goal of attacking the evil fire demon. The relic must be recovered before it falls into lye. Goals increase the challenge level as they decrease the emphasis characters can place on combat.

CHALLENGE LEVELS

EASY CHALLENGE LEVEL

An easy encounter is relaxing and empowering for players, as their characters show off their capabilities. Because no characters should take significant damage or be in danger, players have the freedom to be creative and try unusual or inefficient tactics for the sake of roleplaying or fun.

Use easy encounters as warm-ups, to provide respite or confidence, or in a dungeon or other area that should have many short encounters.

- **Hits and Damage:** Low.
- **Resource Expenditure:** None.
- **Formidable Foes:** Stock monsters, dispatched quickly.
- **Unconscious Characters:** None.
- **Ability to Press On:** High. Characters can face 8-10 easy encounters in an adventuring day.

MEDIUM CHALLENGE LEVEL

At the medium challenge level, monsters are of high enough CR to provide some measure of threat, and there could be one formidable foe grouped with weaker foes. The encounter allows for moments when both characters and monsters shine, but the characters are expected to have the upper hand throughout the battle by expending a few resources. Characters are unlikely to drop unconscious, unless they began the battle with fewer than half their maximum hit points.

Use medium encounters when you want gameplay to be engaging but not high pressure. After the battle, the characters are less capable than they began, but will still be inclined to continue unless previous battles have depleted their resources.

- **Hits and Damage:** Average.
- **Resource Expenditure:** Low.
- **Formidable Foes:** Stock monsters, dispatched quickly.
- **Unconscious Characters:** None, though one in four characters may run low on hit points.
- **Ability to Press On:** High. Characters can face 4 medium encounters in an adventuring day.

HARD CHALLENGE LEVEL

A hard encounter features one or more formidable foes that can function effectively, hitting reliably and inflicting damage that causes players to take notice. Hit point levels may go up and down as healing resources are consumed, and the characters often will adjust tactics and expend vital resources to counter the threat.

Several characters or even most characters may lose over a quarter to one-half of their hit points as a result of the monster's high damage output. One or two characters may go unconscious, and there may be moments when the battle seems very dangerous, but the party is expected to emerge victorious. Losing is a slim possibility, but the challenge level of the encounter means the characters are likely in a position to negotiate or retreat so as to avoid all characters dying.

After the battle, the characters can continue, but may decide to rest if they have had other encounters before this one. Use hard encounters to wake up players, underscore the stakes and peril in an adventure, deplete resources, or to present a strong challenge the characters will enjoy overcoming.

- **Hits and Damage:** High.
- **Resource Expenditure:** Moderate to High.
- **Formidable Foes:** One or more.
- **Unconscious Characters:** One or two, and/or several characters may run low on hit points. A character death is possible, though rare.
- **Ability to Press On:** Moderate. Characters can face 2-3 hard encounters in an adventuring day.

DEADLY CHALLENGE LEVEL

In a deadly encounter, most or all of the foes are formidable, feeling stronger than the characters (even if they might not be). Foes hit often and hard. In addition to damage, the higher CR foes often have features and other capabilities that add pressure to the encounter. Players should be on the edge of their seats as they carefully consider and reconsider tactics as the battle progresses. Resource expenditure is very high, as characters dig deep and use their strongest capabilities.

Most characters should lose half or more of their hit points in a deadly encounter. Several characters may go unconscious, and there is a chance for one or more characters to take enough damage to die. The pressures of combat may also result in dying by failing death saving throws, especially from critical hits or taking damage while unconscious. Deadly encounters are especially challenging when the party is already low on hit points and expendable resources.

After a deadly encounter, an adventuring party that began the encounter fully rested will typically take a short rest to spend Hit Dice and regain a few resources. An adventuring party that began the encounter without their full hit points or resources will usually take a long rest. Use deadly encounters to introduce key foes, surprise players with a thrilling challenge, or provide an exciting conclusion to a gaming session or adventure.

- **Hits and Damage:** Very high.
- **Resource Expenditure:** Very high.
- **Formidable Foes:** Most or all.
- **Unconscious Characters:** Several. There is a low to moderate chance of character death.
- **Ability to Press On:** Moderate. Characters can face 1-2 deadly encounters in an adventuring day.

MONSTER COMBINATIONS FOR A HARD CHALLENGE

When we design an encounter we often have a concept that includes the number of monsters the characters will face. We might think of a squad of four monsters, or perhaps a large number of monsters – six or even eight – swarming the heroes. Or maybe we want a stronger monster, acting as a boss or captain, with a few other monsters to back them up. And, of course, it can be a lot of fun for characters to face a single dangerous foe.

In this section we provide you with the combinations of monster CRs that enable these various concepts. Pick your concept, look up the average character level in the table, and you have the number of each CR you need. The monster CRs in this table reflect the definition of a hard challenge (see the previous section in this book).

You will want to combine the information in this table with the tips in this book. You might add a fun attack option to a boss to make them especially fearsome, or turn the boss's underlings into adoring fans to give the encounter an element of humor. The table is your start to a great encounter, upon which you can layer fun elements.

MEDIUM CHALLENGE LEVEL MONSTER COMBINATIONS

The table below provides the monster CR or CRs for several encounter concepts, all at a medium encounter challenge level. The following monster groupings are provided, reflecting common encounter concepts:

One Monster. This is the CR expected for a solo monster. At the listed CR, the monster has the statistics to potentially be a hard challenge. As we have discussed, running an encounter for a single solo monster is tricky. Use the advice in this book to ensure your solo monster will be up to the challenge.

Two, Four, Six, Eight, or Twelve Monsters. These columns allow you to challenge the characters with a number of monsters of the same CR, and usually of the

same type. A hard challenge for four level 4 characters could constitute six orcs (CR 1/2) or two ogres (CR 2).

Using monsters of the same type allows us to quickly and simply tell a story. This is the ogre cave, the orc caravan, or the room with mimics! Using the same monster is easy on the DM, as we can focus on a single stat block.

One Boss + X Monsters. We often want a group of monsters led by a more formidable leader. The Boss Scenario columns provide one monster of a CR that is 2 or 3 steps above the CR level of its subordinates. For example, a group of four level 3 characters could face one boss of CR 2 and two subordinates of CR 1/2. This could be an ogre and the two rust monsters it befriended, for example.

The last column provides you with eight minions, two lieutenants of a CR that is 2 steps higher than the minions, and one boss of a CR that is 3 steps higher than the lieutenants.

USING THE TABLE

Follow these steps to use the table below:

1. In the first column, find the row containing the average character level for the adventuring party. (To find the average, add up all the levels, then divide by the number of characters.)
2. Follow that row to the column containing the encounter concept you wish to use. For example, we may want to create an encounter with one boss and three monsters.
3. The entry you cross-referenced will contain the CRs of the monster(s). If a multiplier is indicated, then that's the number of monsters for the preceding CR. For example, for a level three party and the encounter concept of one boss and three monsters, we see an entry of "2 + 1/4 (x3)." This indicates one CR 2 monster (acting as the boss) and then three CR 1/4 monsters (acting as subordinates).
4. Choose your monsters! You can refer to our lists of monsters by CR for different biomes. [Name of this list to be provided later, when we finish the list]

Assume 4 Characters, Hard challenges for all encounters per DMG										
Average PC Level	All monsters are Same CR						Boss Scenarios			
	1 Monster	2 Monsters	4 Monsters	6 Monsters	8 Monsters	12 Monsters	1 Boss + 2 Monsters	1 Boss + 3 Monsters	1 Boss (+3 CR) + 4 Underlings	1 Boss (+3 CR) + 2 Lieutenants (+2 CR) + 8 Minions
1	1	1/2	1/8	1/8	0	0	1/2 + 1/8 (x2)	1/2 + 1/8 (x3)	1/4 + 1/8 (x4)	-
2	3	1	1/2	1/4	1/8	0	1 + 1/4 (x2)	1 + 1/4 (x3)	1 + 1/8 (x4)	1/2 + 1/4 (x2) + 0 (x8)
3	4	2	1/2	1/2	1/4	1/8	2 + 1/2 (x2)	2 + 1/4 (x3)	2 + 1/4 (x4)	1 + 1/4 (x2) + 0 (x8)
4	5	2	1	1/2	1/2	1/4	2 + 1 (x2)	2 + 1/2 (x3)	2 + 1/2 (x4)	2 + 1/4 (x2) + 0 (x8)
5	8	4	2	1	1	1/2	5 + 2 (x2)	3 + 2 (x3)	5 + 1 (x4)	3 + 1 (x2) + 1/4 (x8)
6	9	5	2	2	1	1/2	6 + 3 (x2)	4 + 2 (x3)	6 + 1 (x4)	4 + 1 (x2) + 1/2 (x8)
7	10	7	3	2	1	1/2	7 + 3 (x2)	4 + 3 (x3)	7 + 1 (x4)	4 + 2 (x2) + 1/2 (x8)
8	11	8	3	2	2	1	8 + 4 (x2)	5 + 3 (x3)	8 + 2 (x4)	5 + 3 (x2) + 1/2 (x8)
9	12	9	4	3	2	1	9 + 4 (x2)	6 + 3 (x3)	9 + 2 (x4)	6 + 3 (x2) + 1/2 (x8)
10	15	10	5	3	2	2	10 + 5 (x2)	6 + 4 (x3)	10 + 2 (x4)	6 + 4 (x2) + 1 (x8)
11	16	11	8	5	4	2	11 + 5 (x2)	7 + 4 (x3)	11 + 2 (x4)	7 + 4 (x2) + 1 (x8)
12	18	12	9	6	5	3	12 + 6 (x2)	8 + 5 (x3)	12 + 3 (x4)	8 + 5 (x2) + 1 (x8)
13	19	13	9	6	6	3	13 + 6 (x2)	8 + 5 (x3)	13 + 3 (x4)	8 + 5 (x2) + 2 (x8)
14	21	14	10	7	7	3	14 + 7 (x2)	9 + 6 (x3)	14 + 3 (x4)	9 + 6 (x2) + 2 (x8)
15	22	15	11	7	7	3	15 + 7 (x2)	10 + 6 (x3)	15 + 3 (x4)	10 + 6 (x2) + 2 (x8)
16	24	16	12	8	8	4	16 + 8 (x2)	10 + 7 (x3)	16 + 4 (x4)	10 + 7 (x2) + 3 (x8)
17	25	20	17	11	8	5	20 + 10 (x2)	17 + 8 (x3)	18 + 6 (x4)	17 + 8 (x2) + 4 (x8)
18	27	21	18	12	9	6	21 + 11 (x2)	18 + 8 (x3)	20 + 6 (x4)	18 + 9 (x2) + 4 (x8)
19	28	22	19	12	9	6	24 + 12 (x2)	19 + 9 (x3)	22 + 7 (x4)	19 + 10 (x2) + 4 (x8)
20	30	24	20	13	10	6	26 + 15 (x2)	20 + 10 (x3)	24 + 7 (x4)	20 + 11 (x2) + 5 (x8)

TESTING THE ABOVE TABLE

We would like playtest feedback on the above table. If possible, please run some games using the concepts in this document and the above table for your encounter design.

[Please take a moment to share your feedback here!](#)