

SNAP! – Simplified Narrative Action Plugin



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1. Introduction and Motivation

The d20 system¹ features a rich, detailed combat subsystem with an emphasis on tactical aspects. At the same time, these very features are an obstacle for the narrative elements:

- The cyclic initiative system requires a fair amount of book-keeping by the GM. Most GMs use aids such as initiative cards to help them keep track of initiative order, but even then it isn't uncommon even for experienced GMs to mix things up. In addition, things tend to be put on hold at the beginning of combat rather than "jumping right into the action".
- Another artifact of the cyclic initiative system is that time is frozen for everybody but the currently acting character (with the exception of attacks of opportunity and readied actions), making it hard to combine multiple characters' actions into a single narrative when they are by definition isolated from each other.
- While attacks of opportunity break this time freeze effect to some extent, they again tend to disrupt the narrative flow, as action has to be suspended to resolve potential attacks of opportunity.
- The game system all but requires the use of miniatures. While it is often convenient to use them, it would be preferable if their use were optional.

To the end of facilitating faster, narrative-oriented combat, this text introduces a number of changes to the d20 combat system that deals with this problem. The intent is not necessarily to replace the original system; but rather to provide an alternative where fast-paced, narrative-heavy action is desired as opposed to an intricate tactical system. This allows for instance for resolving a bar brawl with SNAP!, while doing the intricate battle later with the baseline system.

A note on terminology: We use the female pronoun for the GM and NPCs, the male pronoun for players and PCs.

2. Rounds

As usual, combat is divided into a number of rounds, each of which are separate from each other. Surprise rounds can be full rounds, too, and are not just limited to partial actions, depending on what the GM thinks is appropriate for the situation.

There is no initiative roll – in essence, all actions occur simultaneously. The following is the procedure for running a round of combat.

1. The GM decides upon actions for each of her NPCs.
2. The GM asks each player in turn what their PCs are planning to do this round. This can be up to a full-round action, but need not be too specific. For instance, a player can state that he's moving over to attack one of the orcs, but if things change during the round, he may be able to choose a different target. In general, the type of action should be stated, and the intended specifics, but the specifics can change.
3. The GM resolves actions in any order she thinks works best. She will likely group melee combatants together and handle area effect spells before everybody's moved around.
4. End of the round. Stabilization checks are made.

The base assumption here is that of the GM as a combat choreographer, who, knowing the intent of the characters beforehand, can form a narrative plan based on that input, and then resolve matters in an organized fashion.

While many aspects of combat remain the same (attack rolls, saves, damage rolls), there are a few things that run differently in this type of initiativeless system.

Changes to hit points and other game statistics come into full effect only at the end of the round. For instance, a character casting Cat's Grace on himself will not benefit from the enhanced dexterity until next round. Likewise, hit point damage will not take a character out until the round is over, even though it is usually clear whether a lethal wound has been dealt before it takes full effect (if this sounds odd, remember that in real life adrenaline usually carries people for at least a few seconds and often much longer before the full effect from a wound is felt). A character dies only if he or she is at -10 hit points or less at the end of the round.

Sometimes opposed initiative rolls are still used; for instance, if two characters are going for the same weapon lying on the ground, somebody has to be faster. Or to determine if a character can get behind cover before he's tagged by an archer. Similarly, if you want to delay an action until a strategically opportune moment, you have to win an initiative check, too – for instance, to cast a Heal spell on your friend after the NPC cast her

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Harm spell, rather than the other way round. Essentially, a won initiative check indicates better timing, not just being faster.

Attacks of opportunity exist in the baseline d20 system because of two types of actions.

- Doing something dumb while somebody is waving the business end of a sword in your face.
- Not looking where you are going (moving around in threatened areas).

Since we'd like to eliminate attacks of opportunity in SNAP!, we need an alternative to simulate that doing either of the above is a Bad Idea™.

To deal with the first situation, any armed opponent attacking in melee gets a +4 circumstance bonus when attacking somebody who is either unarmed or not defending himself actively (either by choosing the Attack, Full Attack, Aid Another, Total Defense, Charge, or another melee combat option). At the very minimum, a partial action must be devoted to such a melee action so that you are considered to be defending yourself.

So, if you're casting spells, firing a bow, drinking a potion, this usually makes it easier to hit you in Melee (rather than giving people additional opportunities to hit you). Although you can fight in melee and combine that with a quickened spell without giving your opponent a bonus to hit you, since you're still devoting at least a partial action to actively defending yourself against melee attacks.

A character with the Improved Unarmed Strike feat (such as a monk) is always considered to have a melee weapon ready, but still must take an appropriate action. A wizard/monk who is casting a spell will still give his opponent the +4 circumstance bonus to hit in melee. Also, you do not need to have a weapon out at the beginning of the round – declared intent to draw it and attack is sufficient.

So, the following conditions must be satisfied for an attacker to get the +4 circumstance bonus against a defender:

1. The attacker is considered armed, either by virtue of wielding a weapon, having natural weapons, or the Improved Unarmed Strike Feat.
2. The attacker is attacking the defender in melee.
3. The defender is not considered armed, or if armed, does not spend at least a partial action on a melee action such as Attack or Total Defense.

Now, on to movement. The d20 system is rather strict in what it allows and doesn't allow – basically, move more than 5 feet while somebody's got an opportunity to whack you with a sword or claw, and you get hit (there are some exceptions, but that's the gist).

First, we can mostly take the above rules for doing something stupid within another character's threatened area and extend them for movement. I.e. if you move, but don't take at least a partial action to defend yourself, armed opponents have an easier time (+4 circumstance bonus) to hit you. Just as if you were standing still.

That actually makes it easier to move around a bit, but that's a feature, not a bug – in action movies, fencers or martial artists are circling each other all the time rather than standing at the same spot where they are exchanging blows.

There are a couple of exceptions that aren't handled well by this approach, however, and we're going to treat them different-

ly. The first one occurs when, say, you try to charge a guy who's wielding a polearm with a dagger (or even a broadsword). Historically, this has been shown to be a bad idea, so you can give the guy with the polearm (or more generally, the combatant with the longer reach) the same +4 circumstance bonus on the initial move that he'd get if somebody were coming in unarmed, since for all intents and purposes he is, at least until he's closed. Once the combatants have closed, of course, the guy with the polearm better get hold of a shorter weapon.

Trying to cautiously move away from somebody is not penalized. If you're taking a double move, however, you're not actively defending yourself and again, your opponents have a +4 bonus to hit you with armed melee attacks. With a strategic withdrawal (move & attack/defend), your opponents can still deliver a single attack this round. This is the exact opposite of what the d20 system does, but to be honest, it seems to make a lot more sense this way.

A brief digression here: The reason why d20 penalizes you for the attack & move away type of action is that your opponent won't get her full set of attacks in if she is entitled to more than one (say, because of a base attack bonus of +6 or higher). This breaks down at a certain point, specifically if your opponent is wielding two weapons and has a high BAB – then it makes sense to minimize her attacks by limiting them to two at most (an attack of opportunity, and her regular attack). Against an opponent with many attacks, or a creature that gets special attacks (rake, rend) in conjunction with multiple attacks (say, a troll), it's actually the perfect defense. And, to be honest, there's nothing wrong with using hit-and-run tactics against an opponent that's likely to kill you if you stand still. End of digression.

The other exception is moving past somebody. For instance, let's assume you want to get to the evil queen to end her reign of terror in a violent and bloody fashion, it is likely that the queen's bodyguard might object to that and put herself in your way. Now, in straight d20 that means that as the attacker you either go through her (using an Overrun, Bull Rush, or Trip action) or around her, drawing an attack of opportunity.

Our solution is simpler. The bodyguard can interpose herself between an attack and her queen, as long as that attacker passes within reach. That allows for a reasonable safety cordon for her majesty, rather than filling every 5-foot-square with bodyguards. If you really want to get the bodyguard out of the way, use a Bull Rush or Trip maneuver, or try to tumble past her (DC 20). If you avoid your opponent's reach, opposed initiative rolls decide whether she can put herself in your way or not.

To summarize, we add these extra rules:

1. If you wield a weapon with short reach, and close in with an opponent with longer reach, that opponent will get a +4 circumstance bonus to attacks for this round only as though she were armed and you were unarmed.
2. If you try to move past an opponent, that opponent can still interpose herself as long as you pass within reach. If you don't pass within reach, opposed initiative rolls decide whether your opponent can block you.

Feel free to ignore the first rule if all it does is complicate matters. It simulates an aspect of combat that may or may not be important – if it is not important to you, discard it.

Since things are not static in SNAP!, there is also no such thing as “flanking”. In general, if at the beginning of the round

there have been multiple attackers declaring attacks on the same character, they get a +1 bonus to attacks for every attacker beyond the second. So, if there are four PCs attacking a dragon, each of them will get a +3 bonus to attack rolls.

In order to avoid depriving rogues of their class abilities, we avoid determining flanking situations, and instead make it dependent on the number of attackers. If three or more characters are teaming up on an opponent as described above, rogues (and other classes that have sneak attacks) get to perform sneak attacks on their victim. If there are only two attackers teaming up on the opponent, sneak attacks can be performed only every other round.

Of course, in addition to that, sneak attacks can as usual be performed during a surprise round if the opponent is surprised (and thus flat-footed), or whenever the opponent loses her dexterity bonus to AC.

As an optional rule, characters that have sneak attacks can make an opposed initiative check on the first round of combat to see if their first attack catches an otherwise aware opponent flat-footed. If that check succeeds, their first attack counts as a sneak attack. But in general, characters are considered flat-footed only during surprise rounds. This optional rule mainly exists if the SNAP! rules and the standard combat system are mixed in a game so that the Improved Initiative feat retains its usefulness.

3. Specific Actions

The following actions work differently in SNAP!.

Casting a Spell as a Partial Action. Normally, you can cast a spell with a casting time of one action without fear of being disrupted. Unless somebody is readying an action to attack you, it will go off normally. If cast before you move (or use a move-equivalent action), then ranges and area of effect will be based on the setup at the beginning of the round, otherwise it will be based on the setup at the end of the round (after everybody has moved).

Casting a Spell as a Full-Round Action. Any spell that takes a full round to cast (or longer) can possibly be disrupted. Any time you're being hit during casting, you have to make a concentration check as usual or your spell will fail. Ranges and area of effect of that spell will be based on the setup at the end of the round.

Casting on the Defensive. When you cast on the defensive, your opponents do not get the +4 circumstance bonus to armed melee attacks that spellcasting normally gives them. However, you have to make a concentration check DC 15 + the spell level of the spell you wish to cast; if the check fails, the spell is wasted.

Full-Attack Action. With a full-attack action you can attack anybody within reach, or anybody going past you. You can take only one attack against a target moving through or into your threatened area. You can take your full complement of attacks against characters starting out their movement in your threatened area, or if they remain in it for the entire round. In either case, if a character moves out of your area that you are attacking, you can alter your action to take a move action instead of your remaining attacks (for example, to follow that character).

Readying an Action. You can ready a partial action; you cannot do anything else before the partial action this round, oth-

er than taking a 5-foot step or drawing a weapon. If you also want to take a move-equivalent action, or are entitled to another partial action (perhaps because of a Haste spell), these have to be performed after the readied action. The readied action will occur and be fully resolved before the action triggering it occurs. You can disrupt a spell with it, for instance. If there are two or more combatants waiting for each other with a readied action, use an opposed initiative check to see who wins the deadlock.

Disarm an Opponent. Unless you have the Improved Disarm feat, your opponent gets a +4 circumstance bonus on all attack rolls against you, including the disarming attempt. If you're attempting an unarmed disarm attempt (without having the Improved Unarmed Strike feat), this is cumulative with attacking unarmed – for a total +8 circumstance bonus for your opponent. It is just a bad idea to grab a blade with your bare hands if you don't know how to go about that.

Grappling a Character. As usual, when attacking without a weapon (and this applies to monks and other characters with Improved Unarmed Strike as well), all your opponents get a +4 circumstance bonus to melee attacks during a grapple attempt. If the character you are trying to grapple manages to hit and injure you during this round, the grapple attempt fails.

Bull Rush. Unless you have the Improved Bull Rush feat, your chosen opponent for the Bull Rush attempt gains a +4 bonus to armed melee attacks against you.

Striking an Attended Object. This works like a Disarm attempt, in that your opponent gets a +4 on all attack rolls against you.

Charge. You suffer your -2 penalty to AC during the round you are charging, not from the end of the round until the next turn.

Overrun. This works as before. It is suggested to augment the rules so that when you're trying to overrun a character, you can also use a Bull Rush to get the blocking character out of the way. Also, an opponent might actually interpose herself if you pass within reach.

4. Feats

The following feats have changed when SNAP! is used:

Improved Initiative. This works as before, except that initiative is now used on an ad-hoc basis. The GM can also decide to give somebody with the Improved Initiative feat a +2 bonus on dexterity-based checks where quickness is important.

Combat Reflexes. A character with the Combat Reflexes feat gets a +2 bonus to attacks against characters moving out of or through his threatened area (note that the moving characters have to take more than a 5-foot step for that). In addition, if you have the Combat Reflexes feat, you can make a Reflex save DC 20 (plus or minus circumstance modifiers) to avoid being surprised in situations where you'd normally be. If you make the save, you can act during the surprise round.

Mobility. This feat negates the effect of Combat Reflexes when moving through threatened areas and grants the character a +1 Dodge bonus to AC when taking at least one move action this round (a five-foot step doesn't count).

Improved Disarm, Sunder, Improved Bull Rush. See the specific attack actions to see how the feats have changed.

5. Additional Actions

The Haste spell and similar effects that confer additional partial actions deserve special treatment:

- If a character casts multiple spells, range and area effect for the first spell are based on the setup at the beginning of the round; the second spell will be based on the setup at the end of the round.
- The second partial action can be conditional on the effects of the first; the character can declare two alternatives, for instance: “If my Magic Missile spell is dissipated by a Shield Spell, then I am going to use Enervation; otherwise, I’ll cast another Magic Missile.”

It is the personal opinion of the author, however, that Haste and Mass Haste as spells are severely broken and should probably just grant an all-around +2 haste bonus to attacks, AC, reflex saves, and ability/skill checks instead of the current effect.

6. Optional Initiative Rule

If simultaneous actions strain credibility for you, the systems works acceptably with group initiative, too.

Each side rolls for initiative each round; the group with the highest roll goes first this round. Start with a randomly selected character, then move around the table each round (or to the next character in your NPC write-ups). Note that actions have to be declared before initiative is rolled.

Actions by the group that goes first are resolved first. If your group wins initiative, spells that have a one-action casting time cannot be disrupted. If your group loses initiative, your one-action spells can still only be disrupted by readied actions. Spells with a casting time of one full round or longer can be disrupted if your group loses initiative, even if an action has not been readied to disrupt it. In either case, a successful concentration check can let you continue casting the spell.

If your group is planning on replacing the standard system wholesale (and not only for some fights), it should be clarified beforehand which of these options is being used, as it can affect character creation considerably.

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