

Against the Darkmaster

Initiative

This rule is offered as an alternative to the rulebook Tactical Round Sequence (TRS), replacing several rules and concepts.

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Introduction

I played MERP thirty years ago. One of the concepts I never could wrap my head around was its rules regarding who does what and when during action sequences and combat. In my opinion, MERP and now vsD share oddly intricate and complicated yet ambiguous and unclear rules for what should be very straightforward and basic situations. Hmm.

If you come to vsD from RoleMaster, I'm sure you can simply play on just like you're used to. But, if you come to vsD from pretty much any other game (whether that game is Stormbringer or Call of Cthulhu or Vampire or Warhammer Fantasy Role-Play or, indeed, AD&D or D&D), you will quite reasonably expect a new game to quickly and easily tell you how to run something as basic as "the orc charges you, what do you do?"

This document is my attempt to answer that question for the benefit of vsD players new to d100 gaming.

tl;dr: Introducing the "brand new" concept of initiative to the world of d100 ;)

Notes and thanks

First and foremost, please do not expect these rules to replicate the exact same experience you would have gotten using the rulebook and the Tactical Round Sequence (TRS). You will get a set of rules that non-MERP-ers will likely find much easier to understand and even faster to use, but some aspects of the game *will* become slightly worse (while others will become slightly better). Just agree on what rules to use *before* players generate characters, and you're golden.

In these rules Encumbrance reduces Initiative. It does slow down travel speed like in the rulebook, but does *not* reduce Move Rate. I consider a penalty to Move Rate to be much more severe than what the rulebook seems to suggest. This is why Encumbrance penalties are applied to Initiative instead - to allow players to role-play realistically encumbered heroes without severely restricting their ability to move around a battlefield.

These rules don't track facing. Assume characters are able to turn toward a threat unless circumstances indicate they can't. Players don't need to declare or keep track of which direction they or their shield are facing - just assume the only direction they aren't looking in is "behind".

I considered including initiative modifiers for Weapon Length but in the end decided against it. Yes, this means some weapons become more or less useful.

In some cases I have repeated rules even when there is no change. This is simply for convenience.

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Thank you for reading.

Zapp in March '23

When you generate a new character

You will want to calculate and write down your Initiative Bonus. (This is what you add 1d10 to, when rolling for Initiative).

This number defaults to your Swiftstat plus your Swiftstat, divided by 5. So if your Swiftstat is +15, you'd get an initiative bonus of +6. You could stop here, but I suggest you offer the following alternatives, to temper the attractiveness of having a high Swiftstat:

There are several situations where another combination of Stats may be relevant for determining your Initiative Bonus.

- Adventuring (WIS + SWI): When the great outdoors plays a significant role, or whenever the clue lies in the natural order of things, a wise character in tune with harmony will understand the circumstances first: use Wisdom plus Swiftstat (divided by 5).
- Combat (BRN + SWI): this applies to clear-cut unambiguous situations. When you see the bandit running against you on the path, there is nothing uncertain. This allows warriors to act decisively when it is clear that everybody chooses violence. Use Brawn plus Swiftstat (divided by 5).
- Roguery (WIT + SWI): when faced with intricate traps and repeating patterns, where you need both quick reflexes and fast thinking, you can use Wits in addition to Swiftstat (divided by 5)
- Lore (WIT + WIS): when angry or duplicitous townspeople go from shouting to killing, you can act without any Swiftstat at all. Intuiting what people do is hard, but quick thinking and experience lets you do it faster. Use Wits plus Wisdom (divided by 5).

Example: A warrior with +25 Brawn and +0 Swiftstat generally has a +0 initiative bonus. But when the orcs are charging, he can roll initiative with a +5 bonus.

Some players will want to note down some or all these variants, while other players will feel comfortable calculating them on the fly as needed.

Rolling for Initiative

Whenever you would start an action sequence or encounter, ask your players to roll for Initiative:

Initiative = Initiative Bonus plus 1d10 plus any modifiers (see below)

At the start of the encounter, you may additionally be forced to make a special Perception Skill Roll, called the Assessment Roll. See below for Assessment and Surprise.

Calculating NPC Initiative Bonus: Monsters don't have stats listed. My easy suggestion: use the monster's "Adv" bonus (divided by 5) for initiative (standing for its Adventuring skills bonus), but don't be afraid to simply make it up as needed. If you want a particular Orc to have an initiative bonus of +12, then that Orc has an initiative bonus of +12. You can and will often have several foes share a single initiative, of course.

When it is your initiative you perform your entire round's worth of actions. There is no "declarations phase" and nobody else will do stuff during your turn (except, perhaps, "quickened instantaneous" spells).

You *can* play the game the old school way where you re-roll initiative each combat round, but I recommend you try "cyclic initiative"; the way D&D does it. These rules will assume you roll for Initiative once at the start of combat, and keep the same score throughout the fight (with few exceptions). This means, among other things, that there is no significance to the "end of the round". When every participant has taken their turn, it is simply the fastest character's turn again.

Simultaneous actions: if two or more characters/NPCs get the exact same Initiative result, they all act *at the same time*. Resolve each action before applying the results of either. (This can result in two characters attacking each other and killing each other. Each action is executed before the effects are taken into account).

Parrying

In this system, assume characters and monsters can always parry (reduce CMB to increase Defense, and/or apply a Shield bonus to an incoming attack) except when a rule (or the GM) says they can't.

Most commonly, you need to draw your weapon before you can parry with it. Then you can apply your CMB towards parrying even if you aren't taking an attack action.

Of course, some actions should reduce or remove your right to parry. The GM is recommended to clearly communicate to the player when an action (such making a Skill Roll in the midst of combat) would leave the character open to attack without the ability to parry.

Initiative Modifiers

- Vigilant Background: +5 Initiative
- Shield: -2 Initiative
- Encumbered: 2/3 Initiative
- Heavily Encumbered: 1/2 Initiative

Your current Encumbrance is determined by how you have traveled during the last hour. Not merely what you are carrying this particular round of combat.

- Weary Condition: 1/2 Initiative

Example: Perry has Swiftness +25, is carrying a shield and is Encumbered and Weary. He rolls $1d10+(5+5)-2$ for initiative. He rolls 8 and gets 16. This value is then reduced by two thirds (to 10) and then by half (to 5). Perry's final initiative is 5.

Fluid modifiers

The following modifiers commonly change from round to round:

- Polearm (when not engaged in melee): +5 Initiative
- Casting a prepared* spell: +10 Initiative
- Firing a loaded and aimed* missile weapon: +10 Initiative
- Throwing a readied* thrown weapon: +10 Initiative

**) Requires you to have spent at least one full round preparing/aiming/readying*

- Dashing Attack: +1d10 Initiative**

***) Dashing Attack: take a -30 penalty to CMB. In return you get to add +1d10 to your initiative this round.*

Example: Gandalf's initiative is 14. He prepares a spell, acting at initiative 14 in each round of preparation. But after his final round of preparation, Gandalf's player makes sure to keep their attention when initiative "wraps round", back again to the fastest individual. At this time he declares Gandalf will act at initiative 24 for this round only. If the previously fastest combatant acts at Initiative 21, then Gandalf will act first.

Assessment and Surprise

At the start of the encounter, you may be forced to make a special Perception Skill Roll, called the Assessment Roll. You might also sometimes have to make an Assessment Roll during combat - at the start of your turn where you have just been blinded by a bright light, knocked down, or otherwise dazzled.

Note that in vsD failing Assessment is separate from, and not as severe as, being Surprised.

Assessment Roll Examples: you just need to gather your bearings, but you're still aware of the dangers around you. For example, you just fell from your horse, or someone just cast Darkness, or oh crap the skeletons you can already see are getting up off the ground.

Surprise Examples: the predator lying in wait managing to get the jump on you, the bandits successfully ambushing your party, an unseen assailant suddenly stabs you in the back.

Assessment Roll

Make a Perception Skill Roll. The difficulty is usually Standard.

- Success: You can act freely.
- Partial Success: You struggle to act efficiently. Spend a half-action. You can then act freely.
- Failure: You cannot act this round, except to keep doing what you were doing last round, or parrying with half your CMB. You still roll for Initiative.

The Assessment Roll only impacts actions this round. The next round you can act freely regardless of the result.

Surprise

Ambushes and surprise attacks are resolved with a Conflicting Action: the group setting up the ambush makes a Stealth Roll, while their victims use their Perception Skill. Characters losing this Conflict are Surprised, regardless of which side they were on.

If you are Surprised;

- you cannot Attack and can only take Half or Free actions
- you cannot Parry at all, or apply Shield bonuses to Defense
- attacks against you gain a +20 bonus
- Attacks from Hand Weapons (defined by page 74 as "daggers, armored fists, and improvised weapons") gain a special +10 Critical Roll bonus
- you do not make an Assessment Roll
- you still roll for Initiative

The bonus from Surprise does stack with On Rear, but only if you truly emerge from behind the foe, never entering its field of vision.

Surprise, like failing Assessment, usually lasts only one round. You can often act normally after the first round.

Duration of Choices and Effects

Under this system, choices you make (such as: how much CMB to devote to parrying) and effects (for instance: getting stunned) generally last until the beginning of your next turn, or the next turn after having suffered the effect.

Example A1 (choice): When it is your turn, you decide to parry the Redcap in a blue hat, allocating 20 points of CMB for this purpose. This persists until the beginning of your next turn, when (obviously) you're free to make a new decision.

Any monster (including Mr Bluecap) attacking you in the meanwhile does so according to this decision. You can't change it until it is your turn again.

Example A2 (choice): You are attacked by two Orcs. You're not surprised and you haven't used your shield so far. It is their initiative, but you still get to decide to use your target shield to parry, say, the green Orc. If you choose to use your shield against the brown Orc, the green Orc's attack isn't reduced by your shield bonus. If you choose to use your shield against the green Orc, the brown Orc's attack isn't reduced. No matter which Orc you choose, one of them should be able to attack you without your shield bonus to Defense. When it becomes your turn, you can change your shield use. For instance, if you stunned one orc with your attack, you would naturally switch your shield to defending against the other Orc.

Example B1 (effect): After you act (Round #1), you suffer damage, getting Stunned. You remain stunned throughout the rest of the round, and through the start of the next turn, AND during your own turn (Round #2, making you unable to attack), and throughout the initiative order all the way until the start of your turn AGAIN (Round #3).

Look closely at this and you'll see you were stunned during exactly one (1) of your turns, making you miss out on making one (1) attack.

Just like in the original system, the timing can make this considerably better or worse. If you get stunned RIGHT AFTER your turn (by the very next combatant) it is worse than if you get STUNNED RIGHT BEFORE your turn.

This is unavoidable, and you shouldn't consider it a bug. It just is :)

Example B2 (effect): If you cast a spell on a monster, and the duration is 3 rounds, that means the spell takes effect when you cast it, keeps having the effect when it is your second turn (total duration 1 combat round), and your third round (total duration 2 combat rounds), all the way up until it is your turn to act for the fourth time (total duration 3 combat rounds). At the start of your turn in the fourth combat round, the spell effect disappears.

Flanking and On Rear

The game rules, and the nature of simplifying combat into taking turns, could be read to encourage silly behavior where characters always reposition themselves to the rear of foes, without said foes being able to turn towards their attackers.

Assume that characters always twist and turn in order to avoid taking extra damage. You can't claim Flanking or On Rear bonuses just by using your movement to move around a foe.

In practical terms, let's redefine Flanking:

Flanking: You gain the Flanking condition only if you have an actively fighting ally on the opposite side of the foe you are attacking. Whether your group prefers "opposite side" to mean the exact square or hex opposite the foe, or more in the general sense, depending on circumstances, I leave up to you.

If you flank a foe, you gain +15 to attacks. If you are flanked, a shield can't protect against both attackers.

On Rear: In order to gain the On Rear condition, you need to sneak up on the foe from behind. The two most common scenarios where the GM is encouraged to allow this are 1) the foe didn't notice you sneaking up behind them because you came from behind and previously successfully used Stealth, and/or 2) the enemy is so distracted by other fighting it didn't focus on you sneaking up behind them.

Note that it is not sufficient to just move to "behind" of the target.

If a character realizes he has foes both in front of and behind him, he can choose to instead be flanked by both of them (assuming he isn't able or willing to move away). Sometimes On Rear is unattainable, such as when a character has placed himself in a corner, or when you cannot get behind the enemy line.

If you are On Rear of a foe, you gain +30 to attacks. Shields cannot protect against attacks from On Rear.