Cheat Sheet: Encounter Design

This document includes reminders of key principles of good combat Encounter design. It was written with Pathfinder 2E in mind but can be used for D&D or other TTRPGs. It also includes tables for some principles that have randomized ideas to help spark creativity, or for use by Solo players to randomize their battles.

Rule of 6

Try to keep at least 6 squares between groups or individuals.

Cover

Avoid big open empty spaces. Fill them with obstacles that sneaky combatants can use to hide behind or obtain Cover. (**Ideas**: *crates, barrels, boulders, trees, dense shrubs, furniture, walls, pillars, etc.*)

Multiple Doors

Ensure there are multiple points of entry and exit to the encounter to prevent bottlenecks. (**Ideas**: *normal doors, passageways, secret trap doors, tunnel opened up by structural collapse, etc.*)

Hazards

Provide other challenges to be defeated besides the monsters. Always provide ways that players can overcome these challenges.

Concealment

Provide some form of visual concealment.

D10	Idea	Description
1-3	Smoke	*Smoke from a forge, cauldron, brazier, or torches fill several spaces.*
4-5	Fog	*Either natural or magical in nature, it obscures some spots of the map.*
6-8	Dim Lighting	*The area is dimly lit and several areas are shrouded in darkness.*
9	Steam	*From an alchemy workstation, a cauldron, etc.*
10	Unnatural	*An area of magical darkness obscures a small portion of the map.*

Difficult Terrain

Use patches of difficult terrain to add texture to the battlefield.

D10	Idea	Description
1-2	Rubble & Terrain	*Rocks, cave crystals, stalagmites, debris, collapsed stone, rubble etc.*
3-4	Foliage	*Bramble bushes, dense shrubs, patches of slippery mold, overgrown ivy, fungi patch, etc.*
5-6	Water	*Slippery stone floor, small creek or rivulet, deep puddle, sewer grate or outflow etc.*
7-8	Traps	*Defensive structures, traps, snares, alarm tripwires, magical runes etc.*
9-10	Inclines	*Rough flooring, sloping terrain, collapsed wall, etc.*

Phases / Time Pressure

Instead of having all enemies & dangers present at the beginning, consider having multiple encounter phases, or a special event ("ticking time bomb") that adds tension. You can decide on how many rounds (N) it will take, or roll for the time duration randomly (2D6 etc.)

D10	Idea	Description
1-2	Caged Beast / Monster	*Caged beast or restrained monster will break loose after N rounds.*
3-4	"Help is on the way"	*Nearby allies of the monsters have been alerted and are on the way, they'll arrive in N rounds.*
5-6	Unstable Environment	*Ceiling is crumbling due to old age or a magic spell gone wrong; flood or landslide due to inclement weather; explosion from combat weakens ceiling structural supports; the commotion of battle is causing a cave-in; a spooked horse is about to knock over a tall tree etc.*
7-8	Dangerous Ritual	*A magic ritual or occult/alchemical experiment is about to reach its conclusion, drawing more enemies near, summoning a creature, or creating a hazard/danger of some kind etc.*
9	Protect the Innocent	*To save the innocent you must hurry! Human sacrifice is on the altar; caged prisoner will die in N rounds; victim or hostage will be killed if you don't save them etc.*
10	"They're escaping!"	*A valuable target, enemy, or boss will escape the fight in N rounds.*