

*This is not meant to be a comprehensive Director's Guide, but rather a collection of things to keep in mind for new directors to help run a smoother game, coming from personal experience of multiple directors from the community.*

## Draw Steel Newbie Director's Helper

This document will list a few things that I learnt the hard way during my own beginning as director in Draw Steel. There is always more to say, but for now, I think the following things should help you run a smoother session.

### Combat

Combat in Draw Steel is quick, but takes a long time. The average Combat encounter will take 2 to 3 rounds of combat, but a single combat round can take 45 minutes up to over 1 hour. Additionally, there is *A LOT* that the director has to keep track of. To reduce the load on yourself (the director playing the enemy faction), as well as speed up combat a bit consider the following (these are merely suggestions, not hard rules to follow).

### Encounter Math and Victories

In Draw Steel encounter difficulty is calculated based on the number of heroes and how many victory points these heroes have. The reason for taking victories into account is that the heroes don't become tougher with more victories, but rather they come out the gate **SWINGING**.

2 victories mean the heroes start with 2 of their Heroic Resource (HR) - and each gain at least 1 more at the start of their turn, guaranteeing that they all get to use their 3-HR abilities at the first round of combat. 4 victories do the same for 5 HR abilities, 6 victories for 7 HR abilities, and so on.

In practical terms this doesn't mean a Hard encounter is not hard anymore, it just means the heroes are more likely to quickly dispose of enough enemies to not make it a Hard encounter anymore.

This also has implications on Solo fights especially. As mentioned before, the heroes don't become tougher, and the solo also doesn't become weaker, the heroes are just more likely to unleash major damage on the solo right away. So, for Solo fights, it would be unwise to assume a solo of equivalent level becomes a trivial fight, just because the heroes have 6 or more victories. Keep solos to the same level as the heroes regardless of victories.

### Encounter Building

- Write encounter sheets that lay out the strategy, remind me of abilities, etc. I have forgotten sooo many enemy abilities, especially if they are not Main Actions, but rather traits that an enemy has. Something at the bottom of a stat block is easily ignored and forgotten, even when it is ancestry specific traits that every enemy of the same ancestry has.

- Favor smaller maps over bigger maps. An average map size of 20x20-30x30 is sufficient. Bigger maps means there can be times where everyone just moves without doing anything else.
- Restrict the number of different stat blocks to maybe 4 up to 6. Not every available stat block needs to be used, and having 8 different stat blocks on the field most likely will lead to slowing you down reading up on all the different stat blocks half of which you probably forgot about.
- **Solo Monster** - Solos are cool, but I made the mistake and tried to cram as many solos as possible in my adventure. This can quickly lead to a feeling of combat exhaustion for the players, is what I found. My Advice would be 1 Solo per level, maybe 2, but with plenty of time between them. I ran two with only a respite in between, essentially two sessions back-to-back. Individually they were cool, but overall that gives the players of constantly being in high-stakes combat.
- Prefer *Platoon* or *Elite* enemies in general. Why? Simply because each Platoon or Elite enemy means less actions from enemies per player. A Platoon or Elite enemy means 1 Main Action, and maybe a Maneuver from an Enemy before the next player has their turn.
- Remember that all monsters and enemies can use basic actions and manoeuvres (Minions only being able to use a manoeuvre instead of their action). Every creature can use the `Aid Attack` to give allied creatures an edge on their next attack. Every creature can use the `Grab` manoeuvre, or the `Knockback` manoeuvre. Whether it makes sense for them to use these manoeuvres depends on their characteristics.
- Prefer *Horde* Enemies over *Minions*, and restrict the number of minions. Minions are very quick to run individually, that's what they are designed for. However, running multiple of them takes a while, especially moving them all. The same is true for their actions. Minions as a whole should be considered a time sink for the director in combat.  
I made the mistake to run combat on a very big map with somewhere between 20 and 30 minions. Getting all of them from A to B took forever.
- Remember the book recommends a maximum of 8 enemies per hero and the encounter budget for a Hard or Extreme encounter is going to be hard to fill without breaking that recommendation if you run too many minions.

## Running Combat Encounters

- Prepare for every planned combat right before the session by reading encounter sheets. Some people like to prepare encounters days/weeks in advance, but this also means you might forget about intricacies that you had planned for said encounter
- As a tactical tip, creatures in the same initiative group are all acting on the same turn, not subsequent turns. This means, two creatures in the same initiative group can both move into position to flank an enemy and then attack with flanking edge.
- Use specific Malice features over general Malice. Archetype Malice Features are cool, I get it. But that is another thing to keep in your mind during combat that is not explicitly on the stat blocks. I am not saying "Don't use them at all!", but don't beat yourself up about not using them. Use the monster specific Malice actions, they drive home the impression of that specific monster way more. (Or include the general malice features in your encounter sheet, they are heckin' cool after all.)

## Adjusting Encounter difficulty on the Fly

This is especially important for making encounters easier: If you notice your players are struggling and are having a hard time with a fight, don't shy away from not bringing in reinforcements, or letting your monsters make "tactically suboptimal" decisions.

This works the other way around too: If you notice an encounter you planned to be difficult turns out to be a breeze for your players, throw in one or 2 squads of minions as reinforcements. The trope of extra goons arriving makes also for a compelling narrative in combat too.

## Awarding Victories

While the book has clear guidelines on how many victories to award, especially for combat, this should be more of a vibe than hard math. If the players are struggling to get through a fight and then only get 1 victory point that is unrewarding and unfun. On the flipside, if an encounter of standard difficulty turns out to be trivial, maybe consider not awarding a victory at all. These things should feel earned and well deserved. As the book states: Fighting hordes of rats is not heroic. (A troupe of Radenwright is a different story though, they are fun)

## Player Strategy and teamwork

Depending on how you play (in-person or VTT) put the idea to the players that all resources or even the whole character sheets are something everyone can see. It helps immensely for team strategy if everyone knows how much stamina, how many recoveries, how many surges, how much of their Heroic Resource everyone has. If a player wants to keep something a secret, they would probably have that written down on a separate sheet somewhere.

## Dynamic Terrain Objects

Don't Sleep on Dynamic Terrain Objects. They are fun additions to any combat encounter that can spice up combat a bit.

As a tactical tip for the Siege Engines (catapult, ballista, etc.) for the purpose of using an "adjacent creature action" to reload, aim and shoot, minions can use their squad action for all of these actions individually. So a squad of minions can activate these siege engines every turn.

## Encounter Objectives

Similar to Dynamic Terrain Objects, Encounter Objectives can help spice up encounters, but they can also inspire encounter creation. Personally I try to inform my players of Encounter objectives, either roleplaying, or straight up telling them.

## Frequency of Respites

The book recommends 1 Respite per combat worth a total of ~6 Victory Points. In my experience that is very accurate. Players can push themselves to 8 and more victories of combat, but it becomes more and more likely one or more heroes might die.

If you are worried about your players taking too many respites, keep a tally of how many respites the players are taking and have a system of what happens if ascertain numbers are reached. That can either be narrative things, which are very context specific, but also mechanical, such as for example:

- *3 respites* - Gain 3 Malice and +1 Malice for every following Respite
- *5 respites* - The Final fight of your current dungeon/story arc is one difficulty tier more difficult (Example Standard Difficulty to Hard Difficulty)
- *7 respites* - The Final fight of your current dungeon/story arc is 1 additional Hero Slot more difficult (Example Hard Difficulty +1 Hero Slot)

Given most players will want a respite after combat worth 6 victory points, this means on average your players will take a respite 2 to 3 times per level (if you use the standard levelling speed of 16 XP per level)

## Swapping Player Abilities and Kits

Especially if your players are new, they are likely to build their character in a way that they realise after one or two sessions is not fun for them to play. This is mentioned in the book, but I want to reiterate it here: Let your players swap abilities or kits between sessions, later on once they are more experienced, make it a respite activity like the book suggests.

## Negotiations

Negotiations are an integral part of Draw Steel, so let's think about it for a second to make it enjoyable for everyone.

- Tell your Players that they are in the negotiation minigame, so they are aware that they have to change their approach.
- Especially at the beginning when everyone is new, only run Negotiations with `friendly` NPCs, so that they have enough `Patience` for the players to maybe make a mistake or one without Negotiations being over right way.
- Make sure your players know not only of all the individual Motivations and Pitfalls, but also that they know what they mean, as some of them are not necessarily intuitive. Freedom as pitfall can mean "A world without strict rules is chaos", or for the Peace Pitfall it is "Peace is Stagnation". A pitfall does not inherently mean, the NPC dislikes the particular concept, but rather the implication of it.
- Give Players the opportunity to learn more about a Negotiations NPC before they start negotiations. I don't mean, let them learn explicit Motivations and Pitfalls, but rather let them interact with the NPC in a way that maybe gives a few hints. Negotiating with someone is really hard when you know nothing about them.
- It is always a good idea to bookmark the example negotiation archetypes in the director's section of the heroes book, so you have them always handy if your players decide to negotiate with an NPC you haven't planned anything for. At the same time,

your major NPCs will become more three dimensional if you think about their motivations and pitfalls in advance.

- Don't shy away from telling your players things their characters would know even if they, the humans playing, are unaware of the lore. Example: I started my players with the Fall of Blackbottom. When they encountered a group of Radenwright, they had no idea about these people, their lot in life, what to think of them etc. When they encountered Hawk Lords I explicitly told them that Hawk Lords are a pride People of Elites, pressed into service by Ajax, implicating that they yearn for Freedom from Ajax, and Vengeance against him, and that they think themselves as Powerful, while also giving a hint that they see Ajax as an almighty oppressor with no Higher Authority above him. You can say so much without being explicit.

## Tests and Power Roll result probability

The book suggests three test difficulties, Easy, Medium, and Hard. While a tier 1 result on an Easy test carries a consequence, every result on an Easy test is a success. So by asking for an Easy test, you are saying: "Yes, you succeed on this task, but I want to see if there is some negative consequence to it."

2d10 by itself has the following tier probabilities:

- *Tier 1* - 55 %
- *Tier 2* - 35 %
- *Tier 3* - 10 %

Adding a +2 modifier (highest score at level 1) to it results in the following probabilities:

- *Tier 1* - 36 %
- *Tier 2* - 43 %
- *Tier 3* - 21 %

If we are adding an edge (or skill) to it, we get 2d10+2+2, resulting in:

- *Tier 1* - 21 %
- *Tier 2* - 43 %
- *Tier 3* - 36 %

If we are adding both, and roll 2d10+2+2+2, we get:

- *Tier 1* - 10 %
- *Tier 2* - 35 %
- *Tier 3* - 55 %

With higher characteristic scores, the results also shift accordingly.

(The Stawl App (<https://stawl.app>) has a great dice probability calculator for Draw Steel).

What this means for Medium tests (Tier 2 result: Success with a consequence) is that, if we assume a flat Power Roll of 2d10+2, they have a success rate of 64 %. Almost every 2 in 3 medium tests will be successful and even a blank 2d10 has a 45 % probability to be a success.

To go along with what I said you are saying when asking for an Easy test, let's phrase it in a similar way for all tiers:

- *Easy*: "Yes, you succeed on this task, but I want to see if there is some negative consequence to it."
- *Medium*: "It is more likely than not that you will succeed, but it's not a given."
- *Hard*: "Your chances at success are low, but not impossible."

Additionally, always remember that if there is nothing contextual available right now, general Consequences and Rewards can be:

Consequences:

- the next test (in a montage) is harder
- you gain +2 Malice
- the next encounter is 1 or ½ Hero Slot harder

Rewards:

- a Hero Token
- the next Test (in a montage) is easier or a Hero has an edge on the test
- Next encounter is 1 or ½ Hero Slots easier

## Game Difficulty, Leveling Speed, and Rewards

If you are starting to play Draw Steel with a group of new players, consider only running Standard difficulty combat for your players, let them learn the tactical part of Draw Steel first, before throwing Hard or Extreme encounters at them. Yes Hard Encounters/Montages/Negotiations give more Victory Points/XP, but they also carry a real risk of failing, which is not inherently fun. If your players like that, go for it, but I wouldn't recommend setting it as a base level.

Depending on your session length and frequency, you might want to consider Leveling up at the increased pace of only needing 8 XP per level, Leveling up once in 2 months of real time seems reasonable. (my group averaged 1 XP per weekly 2 h session, which meant in between Starting in February and writing this document they leveled up once and almost got to level 3).

In saying that, Level-Ups are not the only rewards in Draw Steel. Keep in mind, the following things are all available to use as rewards in-game and can be very enticing and fun to players:

- Consumables
- Trinkets
- Leveled Magic Items
- Titles
- Retainers and Followers
- Project Guides that provide Project points towards a Respite Project.

Renown and Wealth are more abstract in Draw Steel, but they also still have an impact on the game. To make them more impactful consider keeping a list that lists the events that lead to a renown or wealth increase. It's a great way for players to reminisce about their previous exploits. (Example: Defeated dragon and plundered treasure hoard: Renown +1, Wealth +1)

## Director's Examples in the Book

In the back of the book are examples for Montages, Archetype-NPCs for Negotiations, and so on. Read them! They are very helpful for knowledge and inspiration.

I am more than happy to amend this Helper Document with additional tips if any of you can think of anything that you learnt since starting to play.

If you have any questions about rules the MCDM discord has a dedicated rules question channel (<https://discord.com/channels/332362513368875008/1334962762237083788>) where you can find help. The rest of the community is pretty great too.