

Michael Socci (A.K.A 'The-Magic-Sword')
Natural 'Combat as War' Structures in Pathfinder 2e

A commonly cited experience with Pathfinder 2e is that fights of severe and extreme difficulty are indeed fairly desperate, squaring up and engaging such fights normally have a tendency of being difficult to overcome for Player Characters that aren't very optimized and whose Players may not have a good grasp of tactical play in the system.

What's interesting is that while the system is seemingly a definitive 'Combat as Sport' system, featuring extensive in-combat levers and various mechanisms of player empowerment such as extensive character optimization and high access to magic items, the way these options are bounded and the accuracy of the encounter guidelines (Severe Encounters can actually be Severe Challenges) create an environment ideal to blend that 'Combat as Sport' with 'Combat as War' (herein defined as a playstyle in which characters overcome encounters that have a good chance of killing them outright by controlling the terms of engagement.)

More broadly, the game is surprisingly well designed for an 'OSR' style of Sandbox play, revolving around player driven exploration, information gathering, and using the information gathered in order to overcome challenges. We'll be looking at how 'Combat as War' play makes sense for Pathfinder 2e, and then looking at other systems that further support these 'Old School' adventure structures.

Breaking Down Encounter Design

Here are Two Charts of interest to our examination of the encounter Guidelines:

TABLE 10-1: ENCOUNTER BUDGET		
Threat	XP Budget	Character Adjustment
Trivial	40 or less	10 or less
Low	60	15
Moderate	80	20
Severe	120	30
Extreme	160	40

TABLE 10-2: CREATURE XP AND ROLE		
Creature Level	XP	Suggested Role
Party Level -4	10	Low-threat lackey
Party Level -3	15	Low- or moderate-threat lackey
Party Level -2	20	Any lackey or standard creature
Party Level -1	30	Any standard creature
Party Level	40	Any standard creature or low-threat boss
Party Level +1	60	Low- or moderate-threat boss
Party Level +2	80	Moderate- or severe-threat boss
Party Level +3	120	Severe- or extreme-threat boss
Party Level +4	160	Extreme-threat solo boss

Table 10-1 informs us of the thresholds of experience points at which an encounter ascends in difficulty, and Table 10-2 informs us what each creature is worth to the overall encounter in terms of experience points. Of special interest to our purposes, is the fact that when halved Severe Encounters and Extreme Encounters become Low and Moderate encounters respectively.

As a result, these charts do more than show us how to build encounters, they provide a structure by which we can think of larger encounters as being comprised of smaller encounters that, through good play on the part of the players, could be separated. This requires forethought on the part of the GM or adventure designer in question however.

Consider the following simplified example: we have two sequential dungeon rooms separated by an unlocked door that can be locked or otherwise blocked off utilizing the environment somehow, the players come down the hallway toward this room from the side the door can be locked. Each room contains two creatures of Party Level - 1, therefore worth 30 experience points each. The way this area is designed, is that as the foes in the second room hear the sound of combat, they will join the foes in the first room forming one Severe Encounter (Worth 120 Experience Points.) But, if say, a player wins initiative charges through the room immediately and locks the door (or knocks over a pillar to block it, or whatever the available mechanism is) such that the foes in the second room can't join the foes in the first, the encounter instead becomes two Low Difficulty Encounters, a much easier prospect for any party.

As I discussed, this example is simplified: there's no reason for the locking mechanism that seals the rooms off from one another to be something that can only be performed in combat, and no reason the foes have to be considered stationary. Perhaps Zelda-style puzzle box mechanics could allow the room to be sealed off from elsewhere in the dungeon, or perhaps the scenario requires the foes to guard multiple paths, and the PC's can lure half the total Severe Encounter away, spreading their forces over two points of entry that require guarding.

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The means by which the encounters could be split are as diverse as allowed the architecture of the dungeon and the toolkits of the players.

One major reason Pathfinder 2e is especially good at this structure of discovering various means of changing the terms of engagement lies at the intersection of 'Combat as War' play, and the system's "Exploration Mode." We'll discuss that next, but for now, keep in mind this idea of a difficult 'Master Encounter' that is designed to be breakable into bite-sized chunks by the actions of the players.

Exploration Mode

Exploration Mode is Pathfinder 2e's formalized system for moving through adventuring environments and interacting with that environment in a mechanical fashion. The time scale is deliberately fungible, but at minimum, moves in 10 minute increments. Fans of truly old school Dungeons and Dragons may take note of the similarity to the 10 minute exploration turns used in early DND Systems. In this mode, players can do things like 'Search' 'Investigate' 'Scout' and 'Detect Magic' on an ongoing basis as they move through their environment, I tend to think of it as a form of 'Marching Order' that centers the role each participant plays in the 'Crawl' of a Dungeon Crawl.

Because this system is formalized in this way, it can be an avenue for skilled play to express itself-- players may choose to optimize their ability for their characters to consistently perform well at certain activities, they can make choices about potentially doubling up on certain activities such as 'Search' and 'Investigate.' This gives us as Game Masters and Designers the opportunity to intersect the 'Terms of Engagement' with the mechanics of Exploration Mode. This is especially exciting because skill feats are siloed away from the majority of combat-useful feats, giving players space to develop robust toolkits for Exploration and Social Interactions.

In practical terms: Players might use 'search' to find Secret Passageways that bypass singularly difficult monsters, providing an alternative means of moving through the space that they guard. Players might find traps that they repurpose for use against foes who pursue them. Players might find magical or mechanical controls for various apparatus throughout the dungeon that can be used to mess with monsters, or they might be able to create diversions so multiple paths require attention at once, thereby splitting up the parties. Players might find information on soothing otherwise hostile creatures 'using investigate', or paths that force monsters away from stationary traps that contribute to the encounter budget. They might even find items hidden away that will simply make them stronger, or give them an edge in particular fights through weaknesses and resistances.

In short, most tactics that a player in a more traditional OSR game might use to give themselves an edge are valid here, and are promoted by the formalization of Exploration Mode to provide a crunchier and more concrete framework for exploration.

Chases and Retreat

One common issue taken with the modern Dungeons and Dragons systems is that players are conditioned to not feel a need to retreat, because the rules for retreat and pursuit are fuzzy and often unfavorable. Pathfinder 2e has a means of overcoming this hurdle in the

form of the Chase rules. As soon as the players declare a retreat, the Game Master could very reasonably switch to an improvised 'chase' between the pursuing monsters and the players, exiting encounter mode entirely.

This is beneficial because it can allow the players to confront potentially overwhelming threats, without committing to either victory or TPK. Since victory point systems are designed to be altered or constructed, this could even be converted into a bespoke 'retreat' system to be used more extensively.

Game Masters, for foes truly beyond the player's ken, may want to establish that player characters can sense when they're too heavily outgunned (e.g. when we've left the bounds of the encounter guidelines) and just let them know that without calling for encounter mode at all (I like to shout 'This foe is beyond you, Fly you Fools!' at my players to accomplish this.) This is actually quite common in fantasy media, where power differences like the one simulated by level can simply be felt, it's a great genre conceit in sufficiently high fantasy.

This brings any creature that might logically have a narrative purpose for being there back into the game, and provides a way of mechanizing their presence without dooming the players (I'm planning to use this in certain dungeons to provide special mechanics-- a sleeping dragon you don't want to wake up, a roving superboss the players have to cope with not being able to take down, forcing them to keep moving and stay out of its way, and so forth.)

I would frame the first obstacle of the chase as 'how do you slow down the foes to disengage' when the players are breaking from active combat, then set the length of the chase organically based off how far the monster would reasonably pursue them or until players have the opportunity to cut off pursuit through slamming down a great stone door or something, or when the players choose to re-engage once they've reached certain areas-- this is another means for the players set the 'terms of engagement' by luring monsters to favorable terrain, to areas where they can be cut off from reinforcement, or into traps either set by or repurposed by the players.

In dungeons with multiple paths, monsters might be conscientious of their need to guard multiple paths, and a tactic like a deliberate retreat may force the enemy to divert their forces entirely-- or cause them to reinforce that avenue of attack, allowing the Players passage through now less well guarded areas if they can cross between such pathways and ultimately splitting up our 'Master Encounters'

Downtime and Crafting

Another major element of Combat as War is that 'Preparation' should be an aspect of skilled play, and something that players can practice before even entering adventuring spaces, being better or worse equipped to take on the challenges before them based on the quality of the aforementioned preparations.

Pathfinder 2e facilitates this through the use of its downtime and crafting systems. Players can use Downtime fairly freely, unless the Game Master imposes a time pressure, to raise funds for consumables or other magic items, buy or craft objects to increase their fighting strength, or Gather information on the challenges that may await them.

I personally recommend limiting the acquisition of magic items entirely by settlement level and related special abilities (ignoring the special dispensation that the book makes for

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special ordering items by higher level PCs) to heighten the usefulness of crafting ability and encourage travel, but that's because I'm leaning hard on 'OSR' structures in my preferred style of gaming. In tandem with the game's existing lightweight hexcrawl procedure (found in the GMG) this actually provides both an incentive to visit different settlements, and a fun system for traversing the land between them.

Either way, players can use the downtime system to enter dangerous spaces with magic items and consumables; foreknowledge of foes, layout, or dungeon mechanics (depending on the relationship between the locals and their local adventuring spaces, someone may have penetrated the dungeon, or they may have some relationship with its builders) that could prove useful to overcoming difficult encounters.

Combat Tactics

Finally, especially for difficult foes, the Pathfinder 2e system has a slew of first-order combat tactics players will find useful, although most have to be built into the character to some degree. Auto-hitting spells like Magic Missile, spells and other abilities that remove actions, spells and other abilities that lower AC or Saves, character abilities like Champion's Reaction that mitigate damage or boost defenses, even forcing big singular foes to waste their three actions pursuing Player Characters across space, are all very useful for those situations where players must square up.

Each of these tactics, despite properly being 'Combat as Sport' in nature, provide miniature means of stacking the deck and leveling the playing field that exploit the natural weaknesses of singular creatures-- their limited action economy, and their presence as a single target such effects can be focused on (as opposed to say, a crowd of five creatures who must be demoralized individually, diffusing the effectiveness of the debuff in such a way that it only affects a smaller portion of the encounter's experience point budget.)

It's worth mentioning them, since players who don't mind the mastery curve can punch at the very top of the encounter guidelines weight class, even in a fair fight. This enhances the overall playstyle being discussed here by allowing failure to be surpassable and give players choices about what solutions they find desirable-- they're never trapped into a single way of overcoming the encounter.

Letting it Work

These systems are all conventional parts of game play (with the sole exception of the chase rules, which a GM has to bring in from the GMG) described in the CRB, that players can take feats to increase their degree of interaction with normally. The trick to using these elements in your game is to design for it lightly (provide the alternate paths between rooms, secret passageways, settlements, doors) and allow it to work to some degree.

When a player develops a plan to split up an encounter or attempt to prepare well, many Game Masters panic and try to keep the encounter's starting position of intrinsic difficulty, or limit their preparation with time pressure, or otherwise force them to square up against the full encounter in a fair fight. But since fair fights with Severe and Above Encounters are intentionally

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desperate affairs (which is good, it makes them actually representative of what they say they are) it means that those encounters have a very real chance to result in a loss.

For official adventures, I think this might be an interesting toy to play with as well, offering a way that players can choose to take on encounters that might otherwise be difficult fights, while allowing parties capable of taking them on the chin to do so, it would allow many groups that aren't as into character optimization to find alternative paths around them and soften the difficulty without removing it for groups that enjoy it. Book text could even advise GMs to nudge players toward such routes if they aren't interested in difficult combat challenges-- such as allowing the secret rolls to discover these elements in exploration mode to auto-succeed. Though that last bit might not be something all GMs and tables would be comfortable with (but hey, it's not like they have to.)

Players would enjoy this, as bypassing fights through clever means seems to be a frequent source of memorable stories, and the player responsible for discovering the means of softening/ circumvention gets a special moment in the spotlight too. Usually we see this circumvention take place through social interaction, because it's something that can be done with many creatures (intelligent, or even animal) to avoid a fight breaking out-- expanding their options through exploration mode is sure to go over well, and it likely won't feel cheap since it's well supported by mechanics and character building options.

A lot of this stuff should work better than it does in say, 5e, because the game has structures and rules procedures for adjudicating it all mechanically. This makes it fair and not like the players just 'got off easy;' it makes it something that a metagame can form around, with characters optimizing their exploration and downtime just as they would combat so that there's meat and potatoes for the players to play with; and offers an environment where multiple approaches to the same problems are encouraged, increasing the feeling of player agency the game provides.