Best Practices - Combat

This update is a collection of best practices that I have discovered for myself in my time running D&D combat encounters in my various groups. If any of these seem sound to you, do not hesitate to implement them to your game. The suggestions here can be adjusted and changed to fit your particular game. Pick and choose as you see fit!
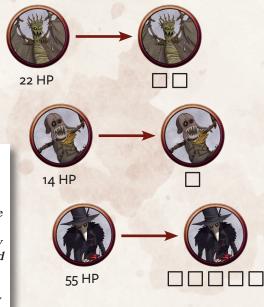
Area of Deployment

I often faced unnecessary discussions about party placement on the grid once combat began. To counteract this I made it a habit of offering my players an **area on the battle map in which they can place themselves**. Depending on the circumstances of the combat, the area can be larger or smaller. For example if the players are surprised the area of deployment is narrower, such as a 4x2 (or 20 ft. x 10 ft.) area. My rule of thumb is to make the area of deployment 10 square feet per player character - it does not have to be necessarily formed in the shape of a square. This way the players will feel like they have agency over the combat right from the beginning and it allows players to discuss combat tactics right from the get go.

Simplified Hit Points

Tracking hit points becomes exponentially more difficult the more combatants are engaged in it - this is especially true if you are not using a VTT platform and only got a notepad or something to track hit points. In a recent part of my home game I ran several large scale combat encounters with over 20 different combatants and to simplify each of these monster's hit points I found this solution:

Instead of using numbers to track a monster's hit points, use checkboxes instead. Each box represents 10 hit points of the creature - you will have to round the creature's hit points to the closest increment of 10. For every 10 points of damage the creature suffers (rounded up or down to the closest increment of 10) you check off one of the boxes. This is not a perfect solution but will make life of keeping track of hit points for several monsters much easier, especially if you keep track of them with pen and paper. In cases of many small instances of damage from a single source such as Magic Missile or Spike Growth you must use the total damage dealt by these sources to determine how many boxes you check.

22 HP → ☐ ☐

14 HP → ☐

55 HP → ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

"You made your way into the old chapel and you find that it is far from abandonned. Illuminated by the dim light, you see a few harlekin and one Strong Boy carrying crates. The moment they see you they drop what they are holding and attack!

Place yourselves in the yellow box and roll for initiative!"

Bloodied Condition

The bloodied condition originated from Dungeons and Dragons 4th edition. It is a simple condition that designates a creature being below half of its maximum health. You do not need to make it a specific condition, but describing an attack to draw blood from a monster, or to **describe a monster as bloodied is an easy shorthand to let your players know that their opponent is weakened**. Many times players might stop before deciding who they want to attack and ask which of the monsters looks the most beat up. Introducing the **bloodied** condition (perhaps symbolized by an icon on VTT or a marker on the table top), or the description of a monster as being bloodied serves as a clear cut language to communicate this to your player. You can take this a step further by also introducing the **beaten** condition, which designates a monster being below a quarter of its maximum hit points. So a monster would progress from **bloodied** to **beaten and bloodied**.

"As you are hastily chasing after the Pale Moth necromancer, you suddenly see twisted figures sliding down the pillars around you. Half a dozen of the harlekin you came to know as 'Shimmy Jims' ambush you!

Place yourselves in the yellow box and roll for initiative!"

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