

Optional Ruleset: Boss Mechanics

This ruleset was designed with making boss encounters more fun, creative, and challenging. A standard rule of thumb for DMs is to never leave a boss alone. For good reason too, this is because of Action Economy as well as player mechanics such as Conditions, Focused Damage, and other methods that can trivialize an encounter.

This ruleset hopefully gives the creature tools to engage and circumvent these efforts without shutting down the heroics of the players themselves.

Telegraphed Actions

A creature begins using an attack where the effect is delayed until the beginning of their next turn. During this delay, the target behaves in a unique conspicuous manner signaling the players that a massive attack is about to happen, affording them the opportunity to evade or interrupt the attack.

This forces the players to think strategically, either work to avoid the damage or burn down the enemy before the attack goes off. This also gives the creature the capacity to directly handle complications by brute force. Just a couple of examples of Telegraphed Actions include:

- Area of Effect. Massive damage AoEs that players have to move away from to avoid.
- Tankbuster. A single target attack guaranteed to do massive damage. To avoid death, the player should use damage mitigating items and abilities that increase saving throw chance, provide resistances, heal, and provide temporary hit points.

When using Telegraphed Actions, it's important to keep in mind the telegraph aspect. The players should be given the clues necessary to deduce the saving throw, the damage type, and the intended target(s). Try to let the players see the action beforehand so they can recognize it in battle. If all else fails, simply telling the players won't diminish the danger or fun.

Telegraphed Attacks need not even go off in the first place. This mechanic is meant to be interruptable should the DM allow it. Some examples of interrupts include:

- Concentration Checks
- Conditions such as Stunning or Incapacitations
- Displacements such as the Shove Action

Methods to making interrupting telegraphs more difficult will be discussed in future sections. There are some things to keep in mind when using Telegraph Actions:

- Reactions: Area of Effect Telegraph Actions adjacent to the creature should consider disabling

Reactions, providing players the opportunity to avoid damage without incurring Opportunity Attacks.

- Legendary Actions: Does a creature keep its Legendary Actions during a Telegraphed Action? If so, which Legendary Actions?
- Lair Actions: Can Lair Actions be telegraphed?

A common design philosophy is that an encounter should be winnable by a group of players only using non-magical weapons. Now, as encounters get crazier and players get stronger, games can deviate from this rule, and Telegraph Actions especially can seem unfair to these undergeared heroes. For this reason that it is worth considering adding certain advantages to the environment to assist in avoiding telegraphs without the use of magic or magic items. For example, a telegraphed breath attack can be evaded by a pillar, or a lightning attack might be redirected by a lightning rod.

Enrage

When certain conditions are met, a creature becomes 'Enraged.' Under this condition, they receive unique buffs for its duration. In addition, they can gain a special kind of action on their turn called 'Enrage Actions.' Enrage Actions function akin to normal and Bonus Actions, only actions that specifically allow use as an Enrage Action may be used for it.

As encounters continue, typically it becomes clear who the winner will be long before the battle is even won. This ends up becoming endlessly frustrating for the losing party, and boring for the winning party who is just waiting to get their loot.

Enrage is a method to turn the tables so to speak. Should the players find themselves having a clear edge on the boss encounter, they might trigger Enrage. Enrage can have a myriad of effects, from conferring resistances to adding actions and allowing the use of Telegraph Actions. This reminds the players that their lives are still at stake and rekindle danger to the fight.

The actual duration of Enrage varies depending on the DM's Discretion. For example, Enrage can last one turn. It could also last as long as the conditions that triggered it are present. It is up to the DM how or if Enrage wears off. In addition to this, players may also opt to try to quell the creature's rage early. Should they do so, use Barbarian Rage as a baseline to determine the efficacy of their efforts.

Enrage and Telegraph Actions synergize well together. A creature that's been Enraged may gain advantage on saving throws or even gain immunities, making them much more difficult to interrupt. An Enraged creature might also have resistance to some or all damage, making damage strategies significantly more difficult. It's for these reasons that Telegraph Actions are a natural fit for Enrage Actions.

Legendary Vitality

A creature has their health pool divided among multiple health pools. When a health pool is depleted, no damage is carried over to the next health pool. A depleted health pool cannot be healed by any method except by resting. In addition, an effect is triggered unique to the creature upon depletion of an HP pool. Some examples of effects triggered by a depletion of a health pool is as follows:

- Removal of Negative Conditions
- An additional turn to be used right away
- Enrage Condition

The idea is to make boss fights tankier without simply giving them more HP, as well as making them more threatening and to provide a method to break up monotony of fights. The simplest way to think about Legendary Vitality is as a trigger. When the Legendary Vitality trigger is met, the creature reacts in a way unique to it. Depending on how players react to this trigger, they may be more prepared to handle it the next time it happens in the same encounter. This grants opportunities for meaningful strategy and daring heroics.

Desperation

A Desperation Attack is a Telegraphed Action unique to the creature. Once a Desperation Attack is used, the creature incurs three points of Exhaustion immediately. There are no inherent limits to when one can be used, but should the players survive it, the creature will be at a severe disadvantage, so it is in the creature's interest to wait until all hope indeed seems lost to use this attack.

The idea behind Desperation is the same as the Enrage mechanic, only more overt. At the end of a fight, should the creature sense its death approaching, a common tactic is for the creature to flee or plead for its life. This allows your boss creature a fighting chance or at least to go out with a **BANG** and leave your player's hearts pumping to the very last minute.

Retaliation

Should a creature incur a certain threshold of damage in a single attack, the creature will be allowed the opportunity to Retaliate. An effect triggers immediately providing the creature some means of avoiding additional damage, such as a shield or a knockback.

An encounter is typically estimated to take about four rounds to complete on average. Sometimes, players can get lucky and end an encounter in two or three, trivializing what might be a carefully crafted encounter. What also could be happening is one of the players is actively outshining the others and you don't want to nerf them just for playing well. Adding a Retaliation Threshold provides the tools for the DM to keep the encounter at a reasonable pace.

It should be noted that this mechanic is not meant to punish players for playing well, and this intent for Retaliation should be avoided at all costs. It is meant to provide an additional challenge for the players to overcome, should they even encounter it to begin with.

The Retaliation Threshold should be high enough that a party doing an above average amount of damage in a round should never trigger it. Retaliation should only occur when an unexpectedly high amount of damage is done that either outshines other players or makes sense for the creature to suddenly violently react to.

Retaliation, while it can do damage should the DM allow it, is meant to simply avoid additional damage from taking place. This is in the spirit of not punishing players for doing well and keeping the encounter at a reasonable pace. What's more, the retaliation itself may leave a lasting effect on the battlefield, providing a problem that other players might solve or even exploit to progress an encounter.

Putting It All Together

The following section explains how to put these principles together and provides examples to illustrate its concepts. The following stat blocks detail examples of monsters found in the Monster Manual that have been altered and buffed using a combination of mechanics discussed in these optional rules.

When calculating experience, consider each mechanic added via these methods and, using the 'Creating a Monster' chapter in the DMG pg 273, find the closest or simply most associated feature. Adjust the CR by half of what is listed, as the mechanic should only appear for a small portion of the fight, and consequently adjust experience accordingly. Otherwise, just make sure that the CR is as high as or higher than the average level of a party that would have the means to counter it.

The Blue Dragon Wyrmling descended on the party, breathing lightning and inspiring fear in its victims. Annoyingly, a single rogue has evaded its grasp for much too long. When that last dagger sunk into the dragon's neck, the wyrmling decided that in order to live, the rogue had to die.

Legendary Blue Dragon Wyrmling

Medium Dragon, lawful evil

Armor Class 17 (natural armor)

Hit Points 26/26 (4d8+8)x2

Speed 30 ft., burrow 15 ft., fly 60ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
17 (+0)	10 (+0)	15 (+2)	12 (+1)	11 (+0)	15 (+2)

Saving Throws Dex +2, Con +4, Wis +2, Cha +4

Skills Perception +4, Stealth +2

Damage Immunities Lightning

Senses blindsight 10 ft., darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 14

Languages Draconic

Challenge 5 (1800 XP)

Legendary Vitality. The dragon has two health pools. Upon depletion of each health pool, the dragon becomes Enraged.

Enrage. While Enraged, the dragon gains Resistance to Piercing, Bludgeoning, and Slashing damage. The dragon also gains access to Enrage Actions. Enrage lasts for one round.

Actions

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (1d10 + 3) piercing damage plus 3 (1d6) lightning damage.

Lightning Breath (Recharge 5-6). The dragon exhales lightning in a 30 foot line that is 5 feet wide. Each creature in that line must make a DC 12 dexterity throw, taking 22 (4d10) lightning damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

Enrage Actions

Lightning Strike. range 100 ft. The dragon's wings begin to cackle and glow a bright blue, accumulating static power. The target creature begins to feel surrounded by static electricity. At the beginning of the dragons next turn, that electricity is released in a lightning bolt directed solely at the target creature. The creature must make a DC 15 Dexterity Saving Throw, taking 33 (6d10) lightning damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

The following encounter shows all these principles wrapped up into a single boss fight. The following fight's mechanics and spells are designed to draw out a fight as much as possible, and the longer the fight goes on, the more dangerous it becomes. The players will have to be mindful of their positioning throughout the fight. And the DM will have to think strategically to get the most value out of Kerrek's Desperation.

The Flame Sorcerer, discovered as a servant of The Dark One, makes one final stand against the heroes. And with an arsenal of fire spells and tricks, he intends on bringing them down with him.

Kerrek, The Flame Sorcerer

Medium Human, neutral evil

Armor Class 12

Hit Points 27/28/27 (5d8+5)x3

Speed 30 ft

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8 (-1)	12 (+1)	10 (+0)	14 (+2)	13 (+1)	17 (+3)

Saving Throws Int +4, Wis +3, Chr +4

Skills Arcana +5, History +5, Deception +6

Damage Immunities Fire

Senses passive Perception 14

Languages Infernal, Abyssal, Ignan, Common

Challenge 8 (3900 XP)

Magic Resistance. Kerrek has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

Legendary Vitality. Kerrek has three health pools. Upon depletion of each health pool, Kerrek becomes Enraged and all detrimental conditions are removed.

Enrage. While Enraged, Kerrek gains access to Enrage Actions. Enrage lasts until the end of his next turn.

Retaliation. Should Kerrek incur 20 points of damage in a single attack, Paralysis, Charm, and Stun conditions are removed from Kerrek and he can immediately cast Wall of Fire.

Desperation. When Kerrek has only one remaining HP Pool, he can call upon The Dark One's favor for one last Hail Mary. Kerrek can incur 3 points of exhaustion to create 3 Stasis Fireballs as an action without expending spell slots. Kerrek cannot trigger these fireballs until his next turn.

Spellcasting. Kerrek is a 10th-level spellcaster, his spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 15, +7 to hit with spell attacks. Kerrek has the following sorcerer spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): fire bolt, light, mage hand, prestidigitation, dancing lights

1st level (4 slots): detect magic, identify, mage armor*, burning hands

2nd level (3 slots): mirror image, suggestion, scorching ray

3rd level (3 slots): counterspell, fly, fireball

4th level (3 slots): confusion, dimension door, wall of fire

5th level (2 slots): dominate person, teleportation circle

*Kerrek casts these spells on itself before combat.

Actions

Dagger. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., or range 20/60 ft. one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 1) piercing damage.

Enrage Actions

Stasis Fireball (3rd level). A Ball of fire 1 foot in diameter emerges on the battlefield at a point within 150 ft. As a bonus action, Kerrek can trigger this flame, causing any number up to all present Stasis Fireballs to explode. Treat its damage as a Fireball spell upon explosion. At the beginning of Kerrek's turn while a Stasis Fireball remains on the field, it expands by half a foot in diameter and its level increases by 1, up to 9th level. This fireball can be destroyed by one gallon of water.

It is even possible, by using these mechanics, to create a boss fight that does not have a spot in the initiative order. These fights require careful handling by the players to avoid death, but could easily become trivial should the players take necessary precautions. Adding Lair Actions could easily add danger to the encounter without ever introducing a thinking target.

The Archfey sends the heroes out on a mission to remove a diseased tree from his grove before it's sickness spreads. A simple enough task, but the danger becomes readily apparent when the foul smelling excrement from the tree knocks out their wizard friend.

Pustuled Tree

Huge Plant, unaligned

Armor Class 16 (Natural Armor)

Hit Points 41/41/41/41 (4d12+15)x4

Speed 0

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
23 (+6)	0 (-5)	21 (+5)	0 (-5)	0 (-5)	0 (-5)

Damage Immunities Psychic, Poison

Damage Vulnerabilities Fire

Challenge 9 (5000 XP)

Unthinking. The tree has no conscious thought, even when spoken with using Speak With Plants. As such, it automatically succeeds any Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma saving throw.

Stationary. The tree cannot move. As such, it automatically fails any dexterity saving throw and does not take initiative.

Fire Hazard. Should the tree be set aflame, the tree becomes enraged.

Legendary Vitality. The tree has four health pools. Upon depletion of each health pool, a sweet scent is released into the air, attracting 1d4 Swarms of Insects to defend it.

Enrage. While Enraged, the tree deals 5d8 fire damage to any creature that ends its turn within 10 feet of it and the tree is no longer vulnerable to Fire. Enrage lasts until the flame is quenched, but never regains its vulnerability to Fire.

Retaliation. Should the tree incur 10 points of damage in a single attack, a pustule explodes, releasing poison gas. Treat this poison gas as a Cloudkill spell spawning directly on top of the tree and directed toward the attacker.

Final Thoughts

While this Document was written with Dungeons and Dragons 5th edition in mind, these principles can be brought to virtually any tabletop RPG. Kerrek is a beefed up version of the same fight originally designed and ran in a Fantasy Age game. And I feel as though these mechanics would be a natural fit for a World of Darkness Setting.

A lot of these mechanics were inspired by the community via forum and blog posts, so I would be remiss to not credit the inspirations of each. Telegraph Actions were inspired by MMORPGs. A lot of Tabletop RPGs rely on the lethality of a creature to make it memorable and dangerous, but I loved the idea that a player had the means to avoid damage just by proper gameplay rather than simply at the DMs whims. MMOs rely on this a lot and that really got my wheels turning for this mechanic.

Enrage is a mechanic present in a lot of video games, from Monster Hunter to Dark Souls. Translating it into tabletop RPG boss fights seemed not only natural, but necessary in order to make something fun and dangerous. It's also probably the most customizable of the mechanics, as it gives the creature its real personality.

Legendary Vitality is probably the least original idea in this document admittedly. Based on forum discussions, versions of this mechanic were the ideas most often introduced. All I did in this document was separate the HP Gate aspect of the idea from its impact on the fight, allowing more customizability for the DM.

Desperation and Retaliation were actually inspired by Kingdom Hearts superbosses. These mechanics are typically introduced to solve a problem that DnD presently faces with its boss fights, Stunlocking. A determined monk with enough Ki could completely ruin a single target encounter with lucky enough rolls, even with Legendary Resistances. The only work around was to simply introduce status immunities, but Retaliation turns that 'no' strategy into a 'yes, and' strategy instead.

These mechanics have made thinking about boss fights really fun for me! But bear in mind, while these boss fights can take a lot of care to make, what makes boss fights really memorable is how the players overcome them. As such, while it can be tempting to shut down player heroics to get to show off more of the boss fight's mechanics, if they manage to avoid most of them or do something to avoid them, let them. Your players will have more fun and feel more heroic that way. Happy Boss Fighting!