

## Dealing With Large Parties

### *Part 1: Challenging Encounters*

About a year ago, I wrote a "Dungeons & Dragons" article for *Dragon Magazine* regarding handling large encounters, both from the point of view of large groups of NPCs and large groups of PCs. Now, as I find myself running a weekly game with seven players, I find that there are still more "tricks" to handling large groups than I had even mentioned back then. Further, there's a real difference between a large encounter and a campaign with a lot of players.

### Challenges for Large Parties

The Challenge Rating system is based around the idea of having four PCs go up against the challenge. What's more, they are four typical PCs.

Truthfully, it's based around having Jozan, Lidda, Tordek and Miallee --

four of the D&D iconic characters -- go up against the challenge. But that's not everyone's group, and we knew that (obviously) when we created the system. The idea is not to make everyone play with four characters just like those very typical PCs, but to create a baseline. That is to say, if this was a challenge for those four, it'll be slightly too easy for my group, because my group is tougher and/or larger. Alternatively, you might say, my group has only three 3rd-level characters, so this CR 3 encounter might be a little tough for them, but since they're so well equipped, they can handle it. Or whatever. The point is, it's a level baseline upon which you can judge challenges. If your four 4th-level PCs get beaten by a CR 4 monster, it doesn't mean that the Challenge Rating system is broken. It could mean that the monster's Challenge Rating was off. It could mean that circumstances made the encounter tougher. It could mean that the players rolled badly or made a silly error in strategy, or any of a number of things. So, "CR 4" does not automatically mean it's an appropriate encounter for your 4th level PCs.

But I digress. In my specific campaign right now, the PCs are both tougher than normal *and* the group is almost twice the size of the typical four-character party. So how do I know what kind of encounters to use in the game? I test them. First, I start simple. At 1st level, I throw a CR 1 encounter at them. Do they defeat it handily? I'm sure they do. So I raise the stakes. Can they handle a CR 2 encounter? Yes. And so on. This is an inexact science, but it is sort of a science. Realize, for example, that an encounter that comes after a series of other encounters is by its very nature tougher. Doing the video game thing and putting the "big boss monster" at the end might be climactic, but it's also potentially going to be deadly. (Sometimes, a good way to handle this is to have the lead-up encounters to a really hard one be particularly easy. Another way is to offer the characters a chance to rest and recuperate right before the big encounter.)

In the tests of my own large group, I've found that I can easily throw CR 3 and CR 4 monsters at my 2nd-level party without problem. Last week, I used a 3rd-level bugbear cleric (CR 5), two more bugbears (CR 2 each), and a krenshar (CR 1) for a total of EL 6. It was a bit tougher of an encounter than I had thought, but that's all part of the process. That bugbear cleric was, in retrospect, too powerful for them -- although they pulled it off and survived. I can't safely go with monsters of a higher Challenge Rating than probably about CR 4. The special abilities (with their fairly high save Difficulty Classes) are too much for them. But lots of low Challenge Rating opponents aren't the perfect answer either. I threw a ridiculous number of 1st-level warriors at them a few sessions ago and it wasn't particularly challenging -- although it was interesting for the novelty of it. (As an aside, what it did was to make the low-level



casters feel slightly less useful. Their contributions were minimal unless they had purely damage-inflicting spells. Why *daze* or *distract* a foe that can be hacked down by a fighter with ease?)

## **Beef Up the Hit Points**

One solution I've come up with is to inflate the hit points of the foes they face. The thing about a large group in D&D is that the sheer weight of numbers is overwhelming. A foe with some interesting abilities to use against the PCs may never get the chance after all seven of them take their turn whacking on him. With fewer players, the foe might be around for 2 or 3 rounds, making it an interesting encounter. With a large group, the foe will be lucky to get one action in. Thus, more hit points just makes the encounter about the same as it would be with fewer players.

There is, however, a drawback. Facing foes with more hit points rewards two types of characters: those who can do things to befuddle NPCs (such as a spellcaster who keeps using *daze* against the powerful foe or a monk who keeps stunning him) and those who can dish out a ton of damage. See, normally the game is self-correcting at low levels. Even if you min-max your character so that he can deal 10 to 12 points of damage a round, it doesn't matter, because the foes you face only have 4 to 8 hit points. Your extra damage is wasted, and the guy dealing 4 to 8 points of damage a round is accomplishing just as much as you. If the foe suddenly has 20 hit points, now the damage machine is "in the zone," so to speak.

## **Variety Works Best**

High Armor Classes, particularly at low levels, can accomplish the same thing, but potentially can skew things even further in the favor of spellcasters (the high-Armor Class foe might not also have good saves), as well as those with huge attack bonuses.

The best way, I think, to present a good encounter for a large group is to stage a varied encounter. Have a few foes with lots of hit points, a spellcaster or creature with some weird abilities, and a few miscellaneous "little guys." This gives everyone in the group something to do. But don't make the "little guys" just cannon fodder. If the rogue in your group takes out the goblin running to pull the lever which will cause the room to cave in, he's accomplished just as much as or more than the fighters who are trading blows with the ogre at the same time. Make every action the PCs do important.

## Dealing With Large Parties Part 2: Handling All Those Players

0In [Part 1](#) of this article, I looked at developing encounters for large groups. This, however, is only half the challenge of running a game with a large group of players. The other main task is dealing with the players themselves.

Even in a normal-sized group, or a small group, players want attention. They want to be "on stage," in the action. They don't want to sit around while other people do things, or -- worst of all -- nothing happens. This becomes harder with a large group, obviously, because you've got more people demanding your attention. Even the most patient of players can get tired of waiting while you resolve the actions of six or seven other players.

### Speed Things Along in Combat

First and foremost, keep things moving. In a combat situation, encourage your players to decide what they going to do before it's actually their turn. The really good ones will actually make their rolls ahead of time, so as soon as you say, "Okay, Bruce, it's your turn," Bruce says to you, "I move into a flanking position around the other side of the hell hound and attack. Does a 16 hit? If it does, I inflict 7 points of damage."

Don't let the game get bogged down with a rules discussion that affects only one of the large group of people. If a player has a rules question, have him or her look it up -- don't stop the game to look it up yourself. Better yet, encourage players to have the appropriate page open when the initiative order comes around to them.

Be aware that this method ends up "rewarding" those who aren't helping you by being efficient. The players who are on the ball, ready to go on their turn, their dice already cast, end up getting the least amount of attention, while the players who hem and haw about what to do and sit and shake their dice for 30 seconds while everyone watches get the most. To counteract this, reward the efficient players in other ways. Give them small experience point bonuses for helping you (and tell them why they got them). Praise them for being efficient and on the ball, preferably in front of the whole group. Or just offer to pay for their share of the pizza one night.

Even while you're speeding things along, don't forget all the good aspects of DMing. Remember to still provide evocative descriptions of people, places, and events. Don't let your need to get from person to person in a combat situation force you into skimping on interesting imagery of the maneuvers, strikes, misses, spells, and monsters involved in the combat.

### Speeding Things Along out of Combat

A good DM can keep a combat situation moving at a good pace. One other nice thing about combat is that it makes sure that everyone gets a turn, and no one gets more turns than anyone else. What's actually harder is managing time when the group isn't in combat. It's easy to get involved with a single person's actions (searching through a chest or gathering information in a marketplace) and ignore the other players. Without an initiative sequence, you can inadvertently give one or two players multiple "turns" to do something without giving your attention to the other players at all.

Sometimes, that just can't be helped. What you can do to make sure that no one's sitting around for too long getting bored is to always have a clock in a place handy for you to see it while you're running the game. Glance at it when someone starts an action. Make sure that no more than a couple of minutes go by before you engage at least one other player with something of interest.

One thing that can help you do this is to handle actions concurrently. Say the rogue goes to a chest to open it. He searches for traps, and finds one. He disarms it. Now he says he wants to pick the lock. Tell him to wait, and ask the other players what they are doing. If another character is searching through an interesting tapestry on the wall, deal with that. Now go back to the rogue. He tries to open the lock, and fails. He says he wants to take 20. Now turn to the other players and ask if they're doing anything during those two minutes. If someone announces she'll stand by the door and watch for trouble, have her make a spot check. Now go back to the rogue. Tell him he manages to open the chest, then tell him what he finds.

There are also times when you can see ahead of time that one player is about to engage in an action which will monopolize a lot of playing time -- 10 minutes or more.

Say, for example, that one player has a character with a mystery in her background. She wants to go to a temple to ask around about some aspect of the mystery. This is cool character development, but it unfortunately doesn't concern the other players in the group at all. The trip to the temple might only take 10 minutes, but that's 10 minutes that everyone else just has to sit there.

Instead, offer to meet with that player and play out the exchange for 10 minutes right after the game, or right before the next game. Or, you can handle the whole thing via an email exchange.

Email, in fact, is a great way to handle any aspect of the game that doesn't concern the whole group or doesn't require the whole group to actually be face to face. Email has become my preferred way of handling the "selling and/or dividing the loot" portion of each adventure, for example. Not everyone has access to email, I suppose, but if you're reading this, you almost certainly do, so that shouldn't be an issue.

## **Splitting the Party**

Similar to one character going off on her own, sometimes large groups like to split up either when in town or on an adventure. When in doubt, discourage the splitting of the party. It's too easy to get drawn into what one group is doing and ignore the other.

If you do allow the party to split, use the technique described above of handling concurrent actions. Continually go back and forth between the groups to find out what everyone's doing. This can actually enhance play sometimes, if you leave each group on a mini-"cliffhanger" to go to the other group. Novelists sometimes make use of this technique in books, where they alternate point of view between two different characters from chapter to chapter, ending each in a pivotal situation so you want to keep reading more. Use this technique, but switch back and forth much faster than a novelist would. A better analogy for a roleplaying game might be a television show with a large cast and multiple plotlines. Give each group only a small scene or part of a scene before switching to the other group.

If one (or both) of the offshoots of the party gets into a combat situation, force everyone to roll initiative and handle all actions round by round like everyone's in a combat. This allows you to play off the natural "everyone gets a turn" structure and make sure that no one gets left out.

## **Prepare, Prepare, Prepare**

Lastly, the best thing you can do for your large group is prepare really well. Get yourself ready enough so that you don't have to look things up in the middle of the game, or, at the very least, use sticky notes or bookmarks to mark pages you know ahead of time you're going to have to reference. If you know that the PCs are going into a desert, mark the starvation and thirst section of the DMG as well as the heat

dangers section. Maybe even the *create water* spell in the *Player's Handbook*. If you know that they're going to encounter a lamia out there, mark that page in the MM too. If you know you're going to need to show the players a sketch of the layout of a lost desert temple, draw it out ahead of time.

If you can keep things moving in a large group without anyone getting bored, all the while presenting them with interesting and appropriate challenges, your players will thank you for it, and brag about you to other gamers they meet.

At least, they'd better.

## Dealing With Large Parties Part 3: An Afterword

In [Part 1](#) of this article, I looked at developing encounters for large groups. [Part 2](#) examined handling large numbers of players. There are a couple other weird issues to consider when you've got a large group of players in your game.

### 1. Beware of the Groupmind.

Logic would suggest that the more intelligent people you cram into a room, the more brilliant solutions to problems that they'll come up with. My experience has shown that to not always be the case. For some reason (probably having to do with the psychology of group dynamics), a single strong personality seems to be able to dominate a group -- intentionally or not -- *more* easily if the group is say, eight people rather than four.

But it's more than just that. The "groupmind" that I'm talking about here can take over a sizable party through a combination of the following:

- A. Each person has less of a say in a large group than in a small one, and may just go along with things without contributing.
- B. Details are forgotten or lost altogether when a lot of people are talking.
- C. The illusion of safety in numbers encourages recklessness.

The groupmind, when it takes over a group, takes the path of least resistance -- the easiest, most straightforward path, which isn't always the best one. I've seen large groups persistently miss important clues and just "bash their way along" through an adventure more than I've seen it happen to small groups -- doing things they'd never do if the group were simply smaller. I've seen more instances of people not always knowing what's going on in larger groups. Communication is harder with more people. People miss details. The amount of "oh, there were *two* doors in that room?" behavior increases in a larger group.

The solution for DMs is to be willing to repeat yourself, go slowly, and occasionally address a single player or a subset of the group with necessary details rather than always to the entire gathering. This latter strategy only works occasionally, and only with the right individuals. But sometimes giving information to one or two people allows them to come up with a good response rather than watch them be paralyzed within a large group structure.

### 2. Too Many Opinions.

Of course, the opposite problem is that with six, seven, or eight people around the table, you've got six, seven, or eight differing opinions rather than just four or five. More opinions means longer discussions, even over trivial matters, dragging things out far too long.

Of course, sometimes the problem isn't too many people expressing an opinion, it's just too much chatter. Players miss details of what's going on in the game when they're talking to another player rather than listening to the DM (or when two players near them are talking while the DM is talking). Whether it's related to the game or not, with more people in the room, there will always be more side discussions.

Some groups solve this problem by having a leader. This can cause as many problems as it solves, though, so unless the players have a real natural born, well-liked, intelligent leader in their midst (and just because someone thinks he is one does not make it so), I don't recommend it.

What I do recommend is to encourage discussion, where everyone gets their say, but don't just sit by while they argue all night. Either personally "Okay, you guys, I need to know what you do..." or encourage them through a plot device to come to a reasonably quick resolution.

### **3. Player Absences**

Life sometimes creeps in and keeps people from playing. Whether it be homework, vacations, or whatever, sometimes someone can't come over. With more people, the likelihood of absence increases. If you've got a group of seven, chances are, you'll be playing with six quite often.

The solution is to always try to get players' schedules ahead of time when possible. If someone's going to be gone, work their absence into the plot so their character is gone as well. If the absence comes as a surprise, that's harder. If you can end most sessions at a point where people can "leap out of" or "leap into" the adventure that's always desirable.

Of course, sometimes players are absent even when they are there. People going off to the bathroom, to get snacks or drinks, outside to smoke, or whatever, can mean that players miss out on the action and then have to be "caught up" when they get back (slowing things down again). With a large group, there's that much greater a chance that, at any given time, someone will be out of the room.

Encourage players not to leave unless their character isn't involved in the action. Or, better yet, establish a set break every two hours or so, and encourage people not to leave the game table between those breaks unless it's an emergency. That way, you actually get everyone there all at the same time and things can get done.