Optional Rule: Sterling Vermin Initiative

Following the release of the Greyhawk Initiative rules via the official Unearthed Arcana article from Wizards of the Coast, many people posted their own take or variation on the concept. While the Greyhawk Initiative system seems to have been developed to evoke an old school style or incorporate traditional elements of certain war games (with their ranged attack, melee attack, and magic attack phases) it doesn't incentivize any new or interesting gameplay behaviors and complicates decision making significantly. Many of the other new variations people are producing are alternative ways of doing an initiative system in D&D 5e without much of a sense of why the initiative system would be different. Provided here is the Sterling Vermin initiative system that attempts to improve the strategy involved in decision making in 5e combat by incentivizing less direct combat actions with better initiative values.

Overview

Like the Greyhawk initiative variant, the Sterling Vermin initiative variant changes some of the standard rules found in the *Player's Handbook*.

Rounds. Combat is organized into rounds. Each round, everyone involved in the combat has a chance to move and take actions, as with standard initiative. But the durations of effects are measured in rounds, rather than ending during a specific creature's turn.

Variable Turn Order. Each round, every creature involved in the battle rolls initiative. The order in which creatures take their turns changes from round to round, making it impossible to predict how events in combat will unfold.

Initiative Dice. Rather than always rolling a d20 for initiative, characters and monsters might roll a variety of initiative dice—from d4 to d20. The initiative die you roll depend on the highest die associated with an activity you took on your turn.

Initiative Count. Under the standard system, creatures with higher initiative have a chance to act each round before creatures with lower initiative. With this variant system, initiative now runs from low to high. Creatures with a lower initiative roll can act in combat before creatures with a higher initiative roll.

Order of Operations. These rules make it more likely for certain actions to take place earlier in a round, and for other actions to take place later. Taking the Attack or Cast a Spell action likely means a character or creature will act later in the next round than someone who spent their turn repositioning with Dash, avoiding enemies with Dodge, or trying to Hide. As with the standard initiative system, the luck of the dice always determines exactly when combatants act.

Rounds

Combat under this system is divided into rounds, each of which continues to represent about 6 seconds of action.

Durations. Any effect that normally lasts until the end of a turn instead lasts until the end of the round during which that turn takes place. Similarly, any effect that normally lasts until the start of a turn now lasts until the start of the round during which that turn takes place. If the order in which effects end is important for some reason, roll a d20 for each effect (rerolling any ties). The effect with the lowest roll ends first, with the others ending in order of their results from lowest to highest.

Surprise

A surprised creature adds +10 to its initiative result and cannot take reactions while it is surprised. A creature is surprised until the end of the round during which it is surprised.

Determine Action Order

During the first round of combat, all combatants roll a d20 to determine initiative. Each round after a combatant takes their actions, the combatant rolls their initiative for the next round using an initiative die determined by the actions they took this round.

Actions are broken down by speed. Because a lower initiative count allows a creature to act more quickly, fast or simple actions use smaller dice and more complex actions use larger dice.

When rolling initiative, you roll only the single highest die associated with all the actions you took on your turn. You do not add any modifier (including your Dexterity modifier) to this roll.

Initiative Dice

Initiative Dice

Die	Action
d20	*Attack, Cast a Spell*
d12	*Dodge, Hide*
d10	*Help, Search, Use an Object*
d8	*Dash, Disengage*
d6	*Move, a bonus action*
d4	—

Reactions and Forced Activities. Initiative covers only the actions you take on your turn, so that using a reaction has no effect on your initiative. You can take one reaction per round, as normal, unless an ability grants you more.

Likewise, any activities you are forced to undertake not on your turn (typically in response to another creature's actions) have no effect on your initiative.

Delaying. You cannot use the Ready action under these rules, but you can instead choose to delay your turn. Instead of taking your turn on your initiative count, you simply act on a later initiative count, before or after other creatures as you choose. If more than one creature has chosen to delay, each creature's original initiative needs to be noted. Whenever a delaying creature decides to act, another delaying creature with a lower initiative can decide to act immediately before it.

Creatures Unable to Act

Any creature that is unable to take actions (most likely because it is incapacitated) rolls a d20 for initiative.

Choosing Another Creature's Actions

If you are in a position to choose the actions that another creature takes on its turn (for example, if you have successfully targeted that creature with the dominate monster spell), you roll initiative for the creature as normal using the initiative die indicated by the actions that creature took on its turn.

Ties

If two creatures tie for initiative, those creatures act in order of Dexterity, with the highest Dexterity going first. If both creatures have the same Dexterity, roll randomly to determine which one acts first.

Special Rules

Certain effects can alter initiative rolls in the game.

Initiative Bonuses or Penalties. Though this system does not apply a creature's Dexterity modifier to its initiative rolls, other effects can alter initiative. If an effect would grant you a bonus to your initiative roll under the standard system, instead reduce the size of one die you roll for initiative, by moving two die sizes down on the initiative dice table above.

In the case of a penalty to your initiative, you apply the reverse process, increasing the size of one die rolled by moving to die sizes up on the initiative dice table above.

Advantage or Disadvantage. If an effect would grant you advantage or disadvantage on your initiative roll under the standard system, roll your initiative die twice, using the lowest roll if you have advantage or the highest roll if you have disadvantage.