



Bullet Points

Player Tactics

by Charles Ryan

Welcome to the seventeenth installment of *Bullet Points*. I'm Charles Ryan, one of the designers of the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game**. I'm here to answer your questions about the game, offer advice on tricky issues, and give you a little peek into the minds of the designers. You'll be hearing from me every couple of weeks.

If you've checked out the earlier installments of *Bullet Points*, you know the format. Every two weeks I pick an issue that's provoked a lot of questions or comments, begin with a general discussion of the topic, and then answer specific questions related to it. If there are any unrelated but pressing questions in my mailbox, I might tackle them at the end of the column, but only if there's room and they can't wait for an appropriately themed column.


Creative Combat Techniques

In this installment, I'd like to talk a bit about interesting player tactics in combat -- what you can do, what you can't do, and how certain strange situations or creative approaches might work out. A lot of questions have come in about these topics -- so many, in fact, that I'll need two columns to cover them all. So this installment is Part 1 of Player Tactics, and Bullet Points #18 will be Part 2.

So why am I jabbering on here? Let's get started!

Questions and Answers

Below are some of the more interesting questions regarding player tactics in combat.

 **One of my players wants to use the Knowledge (tactics) skill in every encounter, but no DCs are given for its use. I don't know what a check result of, say, 17 gets the character for his trouble. How should this skill be used?**

Like any other Knowledge skill, Knowledge (tactics) is used to determine whether a character knows something. As with all other flavors of the Knowledge skill, the DC for a Knowledge (tactics) check is 10 for an easy question, 15 for a basic question, and 20 or 30 for a hard question. For details, see the Check section of the Knowledge skill description on page 66 of the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game**.

If you have a player who wants to make a Knowledge (tactics) check in every encounter, make him ask a specific question, then decide how hard it is. A question such as, "Would it be easy for the enemy to ambush us here?" is probably easy or basic (DC 10 or 15). A vague question that simply fishes for GM hints (such as, "What's the best way for us to handle this situation?") is probably pretty hard (DC 20 to 30). In either event, if the check succeeds, give him an answer that seems correct to you. A little information is


fine -- you don't have to come up with a detailed battle plan even when talking about the best way to handle a situation. You might simply point out one or two aspects of the encounter, such as terrain features, that the heroes could take advantage of. Or you could point out an advantage that the bad guys might be able to exploit.

Remember too that a Knowledge check, when not made as a reaction, requires a full round action. If your player wants to skip a turn in the middle of combat to make a full-round Knowledge (tactics) check, he's probably made a bad tactical decision already.


 **When you're being shot at, can you hide behind something to get complete cover, then shoot over it without looking? If so, can the bad guys hit you on their turn?**

You can certainly shoot from behind complete cover, though your chances of hitting aren't good. For starters, you have to guess which square your opponent is in because you can't actually see him. If he hasn't had a chance to move since you last laid eyes on him, this situation may not pose a problem. But if you guess incorrectly and aim at the wrong square, you automatically miss. Even if you choose the correct square, your target has total concealment from you, which imposes a 50% miss chance on your attack.

On the other hand, since you're completely behind cover, you have total cover from your opponent. He can't shoot you unless he moves to a point from which he can see around your cover. Using cover -- and maneuvering around your opponent's cover -- is a critical part of modern tactics. Take advantage of it, but remember that your opponent will, too!


 **Can I stack the benefits of fighting defensively with those of the Combat Expertise feat? I like to use both the fighting defensively option (boosted to a +3 bonus to Defense for having 5 ranks in Tumble) and the Combat Expertise feat to add about 7 to my already huge Defense score. My GM thinks this isn't fair. Who's right?**

You are. Your GM shouldn't panic, though. If you're adding +7 to Defense, your hero must be taking at least a -8 penalty on his attack rolls (-4 for fighting defensively, even with those ranks in Tumble, plus a penalty from Combat Expertise -- in this case, a -4 penalty for adding another +4 to Defense.) That's a reasonable tradeoff: The bad guys have a hard time hitting him, but he has an even harder time hitting them. Don't forget, however, that GM characters can use the same trick!

 **On the same topic, is it right that a Field Scientist can add both his Dexterity and his Intelligence modifiers to his Defense? I ask because I'm thinking of taking a level in Field Scientist to gain this talent. But my GM says it would seem more logical if I used only Intelligence.**

You have it right. It sounds like you have a very good eye for ways to boost your Defense. If your hero takes a level in Field Scientist, the smart defense talent will let him add his Intelligence bonus, as well as his Dexterity bonus, to his Defense.

If your GM has a meltdown over this arrangement, remind him that you're making a tradeoff. A level in Field Scientist adds +0 to your character's base attack bonus and +0 to his class Defense bonus. So unless the character has a very high Intelligence score, this talent probably isn't making him much better in combat overall.

 **When can a Smart hero use his plan ability? Can he make a plan before storming through a closed door even if he has absolutely no idea what is on the other side? Also, how far in advance can a plan be made? Can he make multiple plans in advance to be ready for several encounters?**


According to the talent description, a plan must be drawn up prior to a "dramatic situation" -- basically, prior to an encounter. In fact, the talent might be stated better if the first sentence simply said, "Prior to an encounter, the Smart hero can develop a plan of action to handle the situation."

Creating a plan takes 1 minute. Once that minute is over, the bonus from the plan kicks in, and the clock is ticking. (The Smart hero, like all characters, can spend all the time he wants "planning" in advance, but the actual bonus comes from the 1 minute spent preparing and reviewing the specifics of the plan before the encounter.) For this reason, the Smart hero can't ever have more than one plan in effect (or "queued up").

The Smart hero needs no specific information about the encounter before creating his plan. He bases it on primarily what he knows about his group's strengths and on what he intuits about potential pitfalls, not on the specific circumstances of the encounter. If the Smart hero happens to have a great deal of specific, accurate information about the upcoming encounter, the GM might consider giving him a +2 circumstance bonus on the Intelligence check for the plan. But if he's just throwing together a plan before busting through a door and he has little knowledge of what's on the other side, that's OK.

So what restrictions are there on the use of the plan talent? Only those that arise from its preparation requirement and time limit. For example, it may be impossible to spend a minute muttering over a plan on one side of a door when a bunch of bad guys are waiting on the other side. They may hear the hero talking to his comrades, or a bad guy might randomly walk out the door during the minute that the group is huddled outside. The bonus from the plan lasts for only a few rounds, so if it takes a few rounds to get from a spot where the group can discuss the plan to the actual starting point of the encounter, the plan doesn't do much good.

The plan talent should be useable fairly often, but when it isn't practical, the heroes must do without it.

 **In [Bullet Points #9 \(Clever Combat Tricks\)](#), you covered a situation in which someone was shooting at a bad guy behind a hostage. I'm still a bit puzzled. Say a bad guy is hiding behind a hostage, and the attacker's roll would hit except for the bonus to Defense from the cover provided by the hostage. (In other words, the cover blocks the shot.) Now, does the hostage automatically take damage? Does the attacker roll an attack against the hostage? Does it hit only if that attack roll would have hit the hostage's Defense (assuming the hostage isn't helpless, but merely in the way)?**

Boy, you've opened a can of worms that I was trying to sidestep in my previous answer.

Here's what you do in the situation you describe. If the attack missed because of the cover provided by the hostage, check to see whether it hits the hostage's Defense. In other words, compare the original attack roll to the hostage's Defense. If it hits, the hostage takes the bullet. If it misses, the attack hits the original target despite the presence of the hostage. In other words, the hostage didn't turn out to provide cover for the target after all.

Again, follow this procedure only if the attack missed the target because of the cover bonus from the hostage. If the attack would have missed anyway, don't bother with this extra step.

Is it possible to climb 50 feet up a wall, then jump down and count that as a charge? Can Tumble help against the damage a hero takes from the 50-foot drop?

Falling is not movement, so technically a hero can't charge while falling. But as a GM, I'd probably bend that rule a touch to allow a character to make a charge by jumping from a height. There are a lot of important issues to consider in such a case, though.

For starters, the fall would have to be deliberate. In other words, if the hero jumps from a height, she can use the drop as a charge. If she falls inadvertently, she can't.

Secondly, when a hero makes a charge, she can't make any other movement, not even an adjustment to line up the charge. Thus, she must already be in the perfect position for the charge at the start of her turn. A character can't climb up and then jump in the same round, nor can she adjust position and then jump if she doesn't begin her turn directly above the opponent. She must already be in the exact position required.

A hero can jump down from directly over the opponent, or from 5 feet to any side (so as to land in a square adjacent to the opponent). Remember that if she lands in the opponent's square, she provokes an attack of opportunity before she makes her own attack, just as she would for entering an opponent's square in any other way.

All the other rules for charging apply normally. For example, the charging character must drop at least 10 feet, but no farther than twice her speed. Thus, if her speed is 30 feet, she can make a charge attack if she falls 60 feet, but not if she falls 70 feet. After the hero makes her attack at the end of the charge, she takes damage from the fall, though she can attempt a Tumble check to reduce that damage, as normal.

Do you have a rules question about the d20 Modern Roleplaying Game? Send it to bulletpoints@wizards.com. For the quickest possible answer, please put the topic of your question in the subject line and keep the question as succinct as possible. If you have more than one question, feel free to send two or more emails -- but for best results please include only one question per email unless your questions are very closely related to one another. Please don't expect a direct answer by email. Check back here every other week for the latest batch of answers!

About the Author

Charles Ryan was one of the designers of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*. He has been designing and editing games for more than twelve years. His other credits include such diverse titles as the *The Wheel of Time Roleplaying Game*, *Deadlands*, *Millennium's End*, *The Last Crusade*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Dune: Chronicles of the Imperium*, and *Star Trek: Red Alert!*, to name just a few. Charles served as Chairman of the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts & Design, the professional organization of the games industry, from 1996 through 2001. He lives in Kent, Washington with his lovely wife Tammie, three cats, two rats, and a dog. He works for Wizards of the Coast, Inc.



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