

One-on-One RPGing: Interactive Storytelling Part Four: Combat Goes Solo

by Jim Zubkavich

This is the fourth article in a series dedicated to one-on-one gaming (one Game Master and one player). In previous articles, I discussed the different factors inherent in a solo gaming experience, some methods to create a solid basis for a campaign and the importance of the first session. In this article, I'll discuss the changes needed when running combat in a solo campaign.

Combat is the tick in many people's tock when it comes to role-playing. It's one of those fundamental things that we can fantasize about without risking actual life and limb. It's the simple excitement that can spice up a story or the pulse-pounding fight that puts everything on the line. In a solo-based campaign, combat plays an equally important role, but there are some differences.

Unlike in a team-based game where the attacks and damage are spread out for the most part, a single player can't survive a heck of a lot of combat all by himself. The challenge rating system was created with a group of four to six in mind; a single character will find an encounter equal to his level a life or death situation almost every time. How do you get your main character into the thick of things without possibly killing him in every encounter?

Change your view on combat as a whole. A solo game can't afford to waste precious hit points on random encounters or dungeon crawl combat after combat. The story-driven campaign that I talked about in the last article should always be at the front of the brain. Any combat situation that the hero gets himself into should have a greater purpose than just kill or be killed. Here's the key: many of those purposes don't have to be outright killing, on either side of the melee.

A team-based game usually gets its kicks on vanquishing enemies. The party charges in, mauls a group of "harmless" monsters and searches them for treasure. Our singular hero can't follow that mentality and you shouldn't encourage it. His goals should be more varied: gathering things, delaying or even escape.

Gathering things is simple to implement into the mix. The character is going somewhere to get something and then get out. It can be anything: an item, a person or just information. It can be in disguise, covert operations or a straightforward negotiation. The tension of potential combat hovers over the mission like dark cloud. The player knows that he's in too deep, he knows that he's probably outnumbered and that he's on someone else's turf. There's no one else to rely on and he has to complete the goal by himself. When combat does occur, the goal can drive it forward; instead of killing to the last man, he has to get what he needs and get out.

Delaying can also create a wonderful sense of tension. If the cavalry is on its way and the protagonist has to hold down the fort, he knows he has to be smart about how he picks his shots. You'll probably see a whole new part of the player as he wracks his brain for strategies and starts to memorize those precious sections on using cover. When help does arrive, he knows that he's done something important and he's done it all by himself.

Escape on the other hand may seem alien to some role-players. A lot of times it feels like the only way to win is to beat the enemy to 0 hit points (or beyond). Solo-based games should reward the better part of valor. It's a valid goal and

can be even more exciting than a typical "Clash of the Titans". If the character has what he wants from a gather-type situation, he should get the heck out! Make sure that your description of the scenario is clear: you are in over your head! Then, keep the chase exciting and make him use his head to get some distance between him and his hunters.

Escape can also be involved with a surprise assault out of the blue or a bungled assassination attempt. The frantic combat that occurs between the attacker and the hero can come at anytime, preferably when he least expects it. If this is early on in the campaign, then this unprovoked attack can raise more questions than it answers and springboard the story forward; Things have become personal and the main character has a reason to get to the bottom of why this has happened.

Notice some themes repeated above: variety, challenges and tension. Create more variety in your combat situations to compensate for the lack of protagonists in your campaign. Keep your player thinking instead of just wondering how his allies can pull his butt out of a bad spot. Challenge him with reasonable enemies and give him a chance to win or escape. Throughout all of that, create tension to keep him on the edge and excited by what could come next.

Some other things of note when it comes to solo combat. A single character is going to have some glaring weaknesses in his arsenal when it comes to combat situations; no character is an island. He may be fast on his feet but not strong, or filled with magical might but unable to get into hand-to-hand very well. Try not to use those weaknesses against him too often. It can heighten the sense of tension when an enemy has his "kryptonite", but constantly throwing it in his face will only make him think he chose the wrong character class to play for the campaign. Whenever possible, let him face people in a way that he can at least hold his own.

If a character loses a combat while flying solo, there are several options. Just as the reasons for combat are varied for our hero, the same should hold true for the antagonists. Maybe they'll capture him, torture him for information or steal something near and dear to him instead of killing him outright. In any case, he's not dead and the story can continue, probably in ways that neither of you anticipated. If he does die, he can wake up months later resurrected, but the cost of that miracle is tied into his future goals and the situation has gotten much worse while he's been away. If you're going for a more lethal campaign option, you may wish to have the player create a whole new character and tie him into the story as he picks up the trail of the recently departed original hero. In any case, it doesn't have to be game over as soon as his lights go out.

Unless healing is readily available or the character is a real combat machine, you won't be able to nail him with as much melee as a typical group game. Make each combat special instead and reward him well with experience points for good planning, execution or escape. When the character can't fight endless encounters, the things that happen before and after the battles become that much more important.

In the next article, I'll discuss tying story threads together, mysteries and making milestones in your solo campaign. In the meantime, dream up unique combat locales and ways to tie them into your adventures.