Eight Ways to up the
Action!
Easy Variants for Cinematic Combat

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everyone talks about cinematic action, but few gamers really do anything like it at their game table. What's the problem?

Falling into a rut with RPG combats is all too easy, because the rules don't always reward taking risks. When fights turn into trading blows and you think action is moving your miniature to flank, you need to increase the excitement of your game. The following eight tips and variant rules give players a reason to try fancy maneuvers or sleek moves -- and you'll find that most of them are just itching for the chance.

1 - Use Improvised Weapons!

Maybe a bar fight breaks out and you want to hit a guy with a bar stool. Or your character doesn't have a ranged weapon, but you'd like to throw a few stones down the cavern. Why bother to improvise when your character takes a -4 penalty on the attack roll? Improvised weapons shouldn't be good, but they should at least be handy!

Drop the Penalty: With your DM's permission, your campaign can ignore the non-proficiency attack penalty on basic improvised weapons by treating such items as their weapon equivalents. For instance, an ale mug can do the damage of a gauntlet. A sharpened stick can do the damage of a dagger (without the increased threat range). A rock wielded in one hand can do the damage of a club. All of these weapons use the Simple Weapon Proficiency.

Even items that are not very aerodynamic can have a 10' range increment. Treat anything you swing in two hands – such as a barstool or a smashed door – as a greatclub with the Martial Weapon Proficiency. They're not great weapons, but they are just cool enough to give them a try.

An added bonus of these items is that you can treat them as nonlethal damage. In that case, improvised weapons make it much less likely that a street fight or bar brawl will lead to a bounty on the party and murder charges by the town watch.

2 - Chase Down Your Foes!

You're being pursued by the town guards. Your arch-nemesis cut his losses and runs. How can you up the action in one of these chase scenes when everyone runs at the same speed? Well, to start...

Roll for Initiative!: In a chase, all characters act simultaneously, but initiative determines whether the fleeing characters have the advantage. Each pursuer a fleeing character beats in initiative has a slower start.

A pursuer can catch up by beating the fleeing character on an opposed Run check in the first round. Otherwise the pursuer falls behind that character for the rest of the race.

The Run Check: In a chase, foes make opposed Run checks. A Run check is really a Strength check, but it adds a character's size modifier to attack rolls (smaller creatures can take corners faster). Characters with a base speed over 30 feet gain a +5 bonus for every additional 5 feet base speed. Characters with a lower base speed take a -5 penalty for every 5 feet slower (so, a -10 penalty for characters with a 20 ft base speed). Characters with the Run feat gain a +5 bonus to the check. Each opposed check represents one round of movement.

Run checks determine who can attack. Each round after the first, a pursuer can make one attack against any fleeing character his Run check beats. Trip attempts and grapple check made while running do not provoke an attack of opportunity from a running target. Remember that a

running character adds add his Dexterity bonus to AC only if he has the Run feat.

If a pursuer's Run check is beaten by a fleeing character's check two rounds in a row, he falls behind that character and can never catch up.

Falling Behind: A pursuer who falls behind one character can still make attacks against other fleeing characters. Even in a two-person chase, he is not completely out of the race – he is just trailing behind. A fleeing character can take a standard action instead of making a Run check – such as mounting a horse or casting a spell – but he suffers an automatic attack of opportunity from all pursuers who have not fallen behind.

A fleeing character whose opponents have all fallen behind can try to escape for good by making a Hide check opposed by the pursuers' Spot checks (a standard action). As another option, he can keep running ahead of his pursuers for a number of rounds equal to his Constitution score; after that, he must make Constitution checks each round to keep running (per the SRD).

In either case, all pursuers catch up to any character who takes a standard action instead of making a Run check.

3 - Climb the Giants

You don't duel a dragon by standing in front of it; you leap on its back in order to stab your sword through its tough hide – but why would you bother? Clearly a house rule is in order.

If a PC can climb on the back of a creature at least two size categories larger, he gains +2 on attack rolls, the creature is considered flat-footed against your attacks, and your critical threats are automatically confirmed. That's how you take out a massive beast – by stabbing your sword through its skull.

To enter a creature's square, you must make a DC 25 Tumble check to avoid an attack of opportunity, and then make Climb checks opposed by the creature's Strength checks to climb it. If you make a successful Jump check to reach the creature's back from above, a DC 15 Tumble check allows you to move through its threatened area.

In either case, you must make Balance checks opposed by the creature's Strength checks on both your turn and your opponent's turn to keep your footing. While clinging to a creature, you cannot take a full-attack action, and if you are knocked off, you fall prone in an adjacent square.

Combating a great brute in this way might be worth the risk, and it certainly gets the creature's attention!

4 - Distract your Foes

Dueling is not all about attacking and parrying. Use your movements to take advantage of your opponent in different ways. You can use the Bluff skill to feint in combat and the Intimidate skill to demoralize an opponent your are facing down, but, as standard actions, these are rarely viable options.

Instead, try making either check as a move action by taking a -10 penalty on your roll. This way, you can catch your opponent flat-footed immediately before striking, or your opponent becomes shaken as you attack – all part of a single combat round. For higher-level play, you can try either as a swift action by taking a -20 penalty on your opposed check. Note: If you have the Improved Feint feat, you may feint as a move action without penalty and as a swift action at only a -10.

5 - Leap in for the Attack

You can charge and jump, but these are always separate actions. What if you wanted to leap over the bar table to land an attack on an opponent or completely clear the front line warriors to strike at the wizard in back – don't these sound like charges?

Normally you can't charge through difficult terrain, low-obstacles, or creatures to get a +2 to attack, but now you can if you can jump over them! Succeeding in the appropriate high-jump or long-jump takes you right to your target as part of a reckless attack when you normally couldn't complete a charge. If you try to leap over an opponent, though, remem-ber that creatures also threaten the 5-foot space immediately above them.

6 - Run on Walls

If they can do it in the movies, you should be able to do it the game, but what would you roll to run up a wall before leaping to grab for a ledge? Balance of course! This might be a trained-only use of the Balance skill, but with a few ranks, you can run along the surface of a wall just as you run along tree branches.

To accomplish this, roll the distance you run with the Balance skill the same way you roll for the distance with the Jump skill. Moving horizontally along a wall with a running start has a DC equal to the distance in feet you want to clear.

If you want to run up a wall with a running start, you make it up the wall a distance equal to 1/4 your Balance check result. Without a running start, double the DC. If you have at least one rank in the Jump skill, you can then attempt a standing-jump through the air starting from where you made it to after running along or up the wall.

7 - More Big Successes

Critical hits always excite people at the gaming table, but rolling a natural 20 on a skill check is a bit of a downer. You did well, but big whoop, it's no critical hit. When a 20 comes up on a skill check, you deserve a chance to confirm it for a critical success.

If you roll and confirm a natural 20, your PC accomplishes the task as if you rolled a 30. That big bonus is exciting for skill checks like Jump or Knowledge, but for most skills, beating the DC by that much isn't worth a lot.

For other skills, instead of treating the die roll as a 30, treat the result as if you had rolled with a -10 penalty and succeeded. If you can confirm your critical skill check after rolling a 20, the bonus should be as sweet as double damage.

As an example, your feint attempt becomes a move action rather than a standard action, you automatically gain accelerated movement for a Balance, Climb, Swim, or Tumble check, or maybe your DM will let you execute a full-attack action after a leaping charge as if you had the Pounce special ability.

8 - Describe Everything

Dice are only 10% of good action. The real action takes place in your mind, and your description matters. Don't say "I attack" before you roll the die. The action word in the rules is fine some of the time. But it's a bit of a cop-out.

Instead, say something like, "Since Mathias is distracting the orc, I aim for its heart with my elven blade!" Not only will you picture more action, other players around the table will be more interested too. Instead of "I cast *magic missile*" try "I wave my hands and throw a small, bright star at the orc!" If combat is only as exciting as the dice in front of you, add your own spin to your actions. You'll be surprised by the difference it makes in a weekly game.

For DMs: Cinematic action works only if you reward players who add to dramatic, action-packed moments with their own descriptions. If a player's actions improve the atmosphere around the table, give him a +2 on his d20 rolls once or twice, or add a bonus to damage equal to his character's level to a flashy attack. Reward the players behind the screen, and at the end of the session, tell the players you did it. Let them know you appreciate what they're doing.

Next, you're in charge of the sessions, and that means you're in charge of the action. In many ways, you're more responsible than the players. Don't say, "You kill the orc." Even for a minion, give the player's action a big punchline. Try "Your arrow pierces the orc's jaw, stopping his charge and knocking his legs out from under him."

Likewise, if the characters are involved in a chase, describe the area they are rushing through each round. Describe an obstacle for each opposed Run check: "You chase the thief out of the alley and into the market. Vendors shout and leap out of your way as you dodge by them. Roll Run checks." The time you spend on description shouldn't be more than a sentence or two, but it matters.

When you describe the action of a scene, speaking a little faster, your players will hang on your every word. They'll imagine the action you describe rather than just looking at the miniatures.

Summary

Cinematic action is the result of taking a little extra time to reward DMs and players who want to fight and chase outside the standard attack/damage rolls. Try it with your game group next time, and write to KQ to tell us how it went.

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