

Unearthed Arcana: Greyhawk Initiative

Early in 2017, I had the chance to attend Gary Con on behalf of the D&D team. Heading back to the birthplace of the game in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, provided a lot of inspiration for me. In the weeks running up to the convention, I tinkered with a few design ideas that drew inspiration from older editions of the game. The initiative system presented here—an element of what I’ve dubbed my Greyhawk variant of D&D—was part of that process.

This Is Not Official Material

The material here is presented for playtesting and to spark your imagination. These game mechanics are in draft form, usable in your campaign but not refined by final game development and editing. They aren’t officially part of the game and aren’t permitted in D&D Adventurers League events.

If we decide to make this material official, it will be refined based on your feedback, and then it will appear in a D&D book.

Why Experiment with Initiative?

The initiative rules in D&D work very well. They keep the action moving and are easy to use at the table. In terms of design, fifth edition’s approach was to treat initiative as an element of the game that was meant to produce as little friction and complexity as possible.

The Greyhawk initiative variant takes a different approach. These rules add complexity, but with the goal of introducing more drama to combat. The order of actions changes during combat, making it impossible to depend on creatures acting in a consistent pattern. Moreover, this initiative system requires a certain amount of strategizing between players ahead of each round’s action.

If adding chaos and unpredictability to combat sounds like fun, you might like these rules. But if you prefer to keep initiative simple—something that quickly fades into the background during combat—the existing initiative rules are likely a better fit for your game.

Overview

The Greyhawk initiative variant institutes the following rules, which replace the standard initiative system.

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 making a d20 roll for initiative, characters and monsters might roll a variety of initiative dice—normally d4 to d10. If you roll more than one initiative die, you add the results together to determine your initiative. The number and type of initiative dice you roll depend on the types of activities you want your character to undertake during the next round.

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. Missile fire usually occurs first, melee attacks next, and spellcasting last. This is just an overall pattern, though, not an ironclad rule. 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

Before a round begins, each creature involved in a combat decides what it wants to do and rolls initiative. Your chosen actions determine which initiative dice you roll.

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 all the dice that represent your actions, then add up the result. You do not add any modifier (including your Dexterity modifier) to this roll.

Initiative Dice

Die	Action
d4	Ranged attack
d6	Movement Swap gear Any other action
d8	Melee attack
d10	Cast a spell

Multiple Dice. It is common for characters to roll multiple dice for initiative. If you want to move in toward a foe and make a melee attack,

Example: Delaying

Able, Bravo, Charles, and Delta roll 1, 5, 8, and 12 for initiative, respectively. Able decides to delay. Bravo also delays. Charles acts. Immediately after Charles's turn, Bravo decides to act. In response, Able also wants to act—and can take actions first because her initiative is lower than Bravo's. Bravo then takes his turn.

Variant: Weapon Speed

If you want to add more distinction to weapons at the cost of speed, replace rolling a d4 for ranged attacks and a d8 for melee attacks with the following:

When determining initiative, a creature attacking with a weapon rolls initiative dice equal to the damage dice rolled for the weapon. Use the base damage listed in the Weapons table in chapter 5 of the *Player's Handbook*, ignoring additional damage granted by spells, magical effects, feats, and so on.

you roll and add together 1d6 for movement and 1d8 for the attack. The result is your initiative.

Bonus Actions. If you want to use a bonus action on your turn, you roll an additional die that corresponds to the type of action you plan to take with your bonus action. That die is added to any dice you roll for your movement and your normal action.

Multiple Actions. If an effect grants you an additional action without the use of a bonus action, you roll an initiative die for only one of your actions. Use the largest die that corresponds to any one of the actions you plan to take.

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.

Swapping Gear. If you want to sheathe or drop a weapon, you roll an additional 1d6 for your initiative. You can decide to swap your gear at any point during your turn.

Creatures Unable to Act

Any creature that is unable to take actions (most likely because it is incapacitated) does not roll initiative. Any effects that such creatures must resolve, such as death saving throws, are resolved at the end of the round.

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 actions you plan to have the creature take, then add that result to your initiative. The final result is the creature's initiative.

In general, if an effect causes a creature to change its actions and it has not yet taken a turn, the creature rerolls its initiative and adds the result to the initiative of the creature or effect that triggered the change.

Action Declaration and Resolution

At the start of a round, each combatant chooses actions for the round. At this stage, actions do not need any more detail than what is needed to determine the initiative roll. A character can plan on casting a spell, but does not yet need to pick a specific spell or a target. A character planning on moving doesn't need to have a destination in mind.

During its turn, each combatant then chooses specific targets, spells, and so on for its chosen actions. The only restriction is that a creature cannot choose actions not covered by its initiative roll. As such, you might find that you need to alter the details of your plans as the action unfolds—meaning that it's often desirable to leave yourself options when you choose which actions to roll for.

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.

Variant: Spell Disruption

For added AD&D flavor, you can introduce the spell disruption rule. Under this rule, if a creature that wants to cast a spell takes damage during the round before it can act, it is restricted to casting cantrips on its turn.

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, so that a d6 becomes a d4, a d4 becomes a d3, and so on.

In the case of a penalty to your initiative, you apply the reverse process, increasing the size of one die rolled instead.

Advantage or Disadvantage. If an effect would grant you advantage or disadvantage on your initiative roll under the standard system, you apply that to the largest initiative die you roll (or to one of those initiative dice if you roll more than one of the same type). Roll the initiative die twice, using the lowest roll if you have advantage or the highest roll if you have disadvantage.

Example of Play

Rath the dwarf fighter leads a party through the Haunted Halls of Eveningstar in search of Xantar, a villainous Red Wizard of Thay. With him are Rupert the bard and the sorcerer Delsenora. Rounding a corner, they spot a group of six hobgoblins accompanied by a snarling troll. Rath's ferocious battle cry puts aside any chance for diplomacy. It's time to roll for initiative!

Round 1

The players quickly confer. The hallway is 10 feet wide. With Rath charging forward to block the passage, Delsenora wants to support him by casting a spell at the monsters while Rupert fires his longbow. Meanwhile, the DM determines that the hungry troll will charge ahead to make a snack out of Rath. Since the corridor is only wide enough to fit the troll, the hobgoblins hang back and hurl javelins at the party.

Rupert is making a ranged attack without moving. He rolls a d4 for initiative and gets a 1.

Delsenora plans to cast a spell and not move. She rolls a d10 as her initiative die, resulting in a 7.

Rath hoists his +3 *warhammer* and rushes ahead. He is moving, attacking in melee, and using his Action Surge fighter ability to make additional melee attacks. He rolls 1d6 + 1d8 for (against all odds!) a total of 14. He rolls only 1d8 because Action Surge grants an additional action without the use of a bonus action. Such abilities do not alter initiative.

The DM has decided that the troll will move and make a melee attack. It rolls 1d6 + 1d8, for a total of 8.

The hobgoblins are making ranged attacks without moving. The DM rolls a d4 for the creatures as a group, resulting in a 2.

With all combatants having rolled initiative, the round plays out in the following order:

- Rupert (1) makes his ranged attack. He fires at the troll, scoring a critical hit.
- The hobgoblins (2) next make their attacks, hurling javelins at each of the characters. Rath is hit once, while the rest of the volley clatters against the walls and floor of the dungeon.
- Delsenora (7) unleashes an *acid arrow* spell. She decides to target the troll, and burns it badly with a direct hit.
- The troll (8) then rushes forward. Because Rath was already at the front of the party, the troll tears into him, connecting with a claw and a bite.
- Rath (14) now acts. The troll is already next to him, so he has no need to move even though he rolled an initiative die for movement. He swings his warhammer and smashes the monster multiple times.

Round 2

The party is happy with how the first round went. Rupert decides to fire again, Delsenora opts to cast a spell, and Rath makes a melee attack. None of the characters sees any need to move.

The DM consults notes and sees that the troll is a mercenary who has been poorly treated by Xantar. With acid searing its skin, the troll wants to run away. Meanwhile, five of the hobgoblins

make ranged attacks, but the sixth decides to make a ranged attack and then move, slinking down the corridor to warn Xantar of the intruders. Since the hobgoblins don't suspect the troll of cowardice, they remain where they are.

Rupert rolls a d4 for his ranged attack, resulting in a 3. Delsenora's d10 roll results in a 6, while Rath rolls a 7 on his d8.

The troll is moving and using the Disengage action. It rolls 2d6 for a lucky total of 2. The hobgoblins making attacks roll a 4, and the hobgoblin rushing away rolls a total of 8 on 1d4 + 1d6.

The second round of combat plays out as follows:

- The troll (2) runs away in terror, its howling almost matched by that of Rath's player as the DM informs him the troll used Disengage to avoid an opportunity attack.
- Rupert (3) then fires, deciding to attack the hobgoblins as the troll rushes away in fear. He wounds a hobgoblin with his attack.
- The DM rolls ranged attacks for the hobgoblins that remain in place (4). The characters note that one hobgoblin is holding back, and seems to be getting ready to move down the corridor and away from the battle. The hobgoblins score another hit on Rath.
- Delsenora (6) now has a chance to cast a spell. Concerned about the one hobgoblin that has not yet acted, she decides to use *ray of frost* to slow it down. Her attack hits.
- Rath (7) has no enemies within reach. His player makes a point of asking the DM if optional rules taken from a website of dubious repute are really what the campaign needs, but the character can still do nothing on his turn. The DM reminds all the players that they can always roll an initiative die to move in case they end up needing to do so during a round—though they increase the chance of acting later in the round if they do so.
- The final hobgoblin (8) throws its javelin, hitting Rath before withdrawing down the corridor.

Round 3

The players confer and decide that the last thing they need is the troll or the fleeing hobgoblin raising the alarm deeper in the dungeon. Rath is

also hurt and needs some healing. Though casting one of his healing spells is an option for Rupert, his player decides that he also needs to help bring down the fleeing monsters.

Rath decides to move and attack, with a total of 6 on 1d6 + 1d8. Delsenora stays put and casts a spell, rolling 4 on 1d10. Rupert is making a ranged attack, moving, and casting a spell as a bonus action. His total is 16 on 1d4 + 1d6 + 1d10. Rath's player once again questions the wisdom of optional rules.

The hobgoblins move and make melee attacks, while the fleeing hobgoblin opts to only move. It could take the Dash action, but doing so would increase its initiative roll to 2d6. The attacking hobgoblins roll a total of 12 on 1d8 + 1d6, while the moving hobgoblin rolls a 2 on 1d6. The troll also continues to flee, rolling a 2 on 1d6.

Round 3 unfolds in exciting fashion:

- The fleeing hobgoblin (2) and the troll (2) both move, with the troll scuttling around a corner and out of Delsenora's sight. The hobgoblin, having been slowed last round, can't reach the corner even though the effect of *ray of frost* ended at the start of this round.
- Delsenora (4) takes advantage of the hobgoblin's position to drop it with a *fire bolt*. The troll is out of sight, but at least she stopped one of the two fleeing creatures.
- Rath (6) rushes forward and smashes into the hobgoblins, dropping another one.
- But his confidence ebbs as the remaining hobgoblins (12) act ahead of Rupert. Rath takes another hit, but is still standing.
- Rupert (16) finally acts, hitting a hobgoblin with an arrow, then pushing forward to block the hallway with Rath and heal him with *healing word*.

Round 4

With four hobgoblins still facing them and a troll running in fear, the players decide that their top priority is to prevent reinforcements from overrunning them. Rupert opts to swap out his bow for his longsword and shield, then make a melee attack. Rath will make a melee attack and move if necessary, and Delsenora will cast a spell. Rath rolls a 4 on 1d8 + 1d6, Delsenora rolls a 7 on 1d10, and Rupert rolls a 4 on 1d6 + 1d8.

The DM decides that the hobgoblins have had enough of the characters. They opt to use the Disengage action and move, rolling a total of 6 on 2d6.

As the fight draws to a close:

- Rupert (4) and Rath (4) both hack at the hobgoblins, dropping two more of them. Rath decides he does not need to move.
- The remaining two hobgoblins (6) successfully disengage but stop short of the corner.
- Delsenora (7) reviews her spell options and hits the hobgoblins with *sleep*, dropping them before they can escape.

Aftermath

With a wounded troll running through the dungeon and the hobgoblins defeated, the party decides to make a quick retreat. Xantar is a cunning foe, and will be all the more dangerous if he is warned of their approach.

Commentary

As you can see, this system has two big effects on combat. It makes on-the-fly actions (such as attempting to stop the fleeing hobgoblins) more uncertain. It also turns each round of combat into a miniature tactical scenario, with the players conferring about their goals for the round and their general plan of attack.

The biggest hazard under this system is ending up in a situation where you cannot take a useful action. So when in doubt, roll a die to give yourself the option to move. In most cases, acting a little later in the round is a fair trade for the security of knowing you can close with a foe if you need to.

Having to create a plan with your fellow players to work together and defeat your enemies means that coordination is critical. As such, you must weigh the benefits and risks of each action you might take in a round. As seen in the example above, healing in combat can easily become a risky proposition. One bad roll can be the difference between delivering a spell in time or seeing an ally fall under your enemies' attacks.