

# GRIM TALES™

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# GAMEMASTERING

In the many worlds of Grim Tales, the heroes are beset from all sides. Most foes are mundane, such as the vast numbers of ordinary human henchmen who serve some greater power. Those greater powers, however, acting behind the scenes to thwart the heroes, may have supernatural powers, and some may even hail from other worlds or dimensions.

Regardless of origin, the various foes with which the heroes must contend are called threats. By and large, heroes gain experience by overcoming these threats.

This section enables the GM to design encounters for the players that are matched to their abilities, and to group multiple encounters into a longer session without overwhelming the players. At a glance, the GM will be able to outline each encounter and well as design natural breaks in the action that allow the players to rest and recover, to be challenged without being overwhelmed.

## Using Creatures From Other Sources

There is a vast and growing library of "monster books" from which you may draw creatures to threaten your heroes. In addition to the monsters available in the core rulebooks published by Wizards of the Coast, you can use monsters from any other compatible d20 source.

## Chi/Rho: An Analysis of CR and EL

The CR system used in the SRD is sorely lacking when the DM seeks to create balanced encounters using either a mix of monsters of varying CR, or when the party size and composition is more varied than "Four characters of equal level."

However, the entire process can be broken down into just a couple of very simple mathematical equations.

### Power

The power of any given creature (monster or character) is generally equal to its CR squared:

$$\text{power} = \text{CR}^2$$

- For most characters, CR = character level.
- For creatures with fractional CR, power = CR. (Do not square fractional CRs.)

A group of creatures will have a total power equal to:

$$\text{CR}_1^2 + \text{CR}_2^2 + \text{CR}_3^2 + \dots + \text{CR}_n^2$$

### Chi/Rho

We call the monster (or encounter) power X (chi), and the party power  $\rho$  (rho).

Examples:

*Encounter (Monster Group X)*

*Ogre1 (CR2, power 4)*

*Ogre2 (CR2, power 4)*

*Ogre3 (CR2, power 4)*

*Ogre4 (CR2, power 4)*

*Total Power (X) = 16*

*Party Composition*

*Wizard-4 (CR4, power 16)*

*Fighter-4 (CR4, power 16)*

*Cleric-4 (CR4, power 16)*

*Rogue-4 (CR4, power 16)*

*Total Power ( $\rho$ ) = 64*

Difficulty

Benchmarking the difficulty of a given encounter is now very easy. We call this equation "Chi/Rho", expressed simply as:

$$X/\rho.$$

The result of this expression is the expected expenditure of party resources necessary to overcome the encounter.

Example:

*Ogres (power 16) vs. Party (power 64)*

*$X/\rho = 16/64 = .25$ , or 25% of party resources.*

As a benchmark, the ideal "moderate" encounter should require the expenditure of 25% of the party's resources. ( $X/\rho = .25$ )

As a further benchmark, the expected chance of party success or survival is equal to  $1 - (X/2\rho)$ .

Example:

*$1 - (X/2\rho) = 1 - (16/128) = .875$ , or an 87.5% success/survival rate.*

## Experience Point Awards

The experience point award for a given encounter are relative to the characters' level. The relative experience point award per character level is:

$$300 (X/\rho) \text{ per level}$$

Example:

*$300 (X/\rho) = (300)(16/64) = (300)(.25) = 75$  experience points per character level.*

Once you have calculated the relative experience point award, you can either award experience individually

## Determining EL for Multiple Opponents

(multiply the award by each character's level), or divide the experience equally among the group (total all character levels, multiply by the relative xp award, then divide by the number of characters in the party).

Our examples so far have used very simple group compositions. Let's look at an example that is more complicated.

### Encounter Composition

4 Orcs (CR ½, power ½ each)

2 Ogres (CR2, power 4 each)

1 Hill Giant (CR7, power 49)

Total power = 59.

### Party Composition

Rogue-5

Wizard-4

Lizardfolk Druid-3 (ECL5)

-wolf animal companion (CR2)

Fighter-6

Total power = 106.

The encounter difficulty is  $59/106 = 55.66\%$ .

This is a difficult encounter, but the success rate for this encounter is still 72.17%.

The relative experience award for this encounter is  $(300)(59/106) = 166.98$  xp per character level. We'll round that off to 167 xp per character level.

### Individual XP Awards:

Rogue-5 =  $(167)(5) = 835$  XP.

Wizard-4 =  $(167)(4) = 668$  XP.

Lizardfolk Druid-3 (ECL5) =  $(167)(3) = 501$  XP.

-wolf animal companion (CR2) = 0 XP (unless the DM wants to track XP for the wolf...)

Fighter-6 =  $(167)(6) = 1002$  XP.

Notice that in this case, although the wolf and the lizardfolk's monster hit dice contributed power to the encounter, their XP awards were based only on their actual character levels.

Using this method awards each character for their actual contribution. Advancement is even across the party (which means that low level characters will never "catch up.")

### Group XP Awards:

Total the character levels in the party and multiply by the relative XP award to find the lump sum:

$(167)(5+4+3+6) = 3006$  total XP.

Now divide the total XP by the number of characters in the group:  $(3006)/4 = 751.5$  XP each. Using this method allows characters who have fallen behind to catch up, but may

unduly reward low level characters who do not contribute as much to the group.

## Encounter Level

Challenge Rating (CR) is a measure of absolute power, while Encounter Level (EL) is a measure of relative power. All of a creature's various CR factors indicate its total combat repertoire; however, EL measures what a creature is capable of doing in a single encounter. During an encounter, one side or the other is likely to prevail before a creature has time to bring all of its abilities to bear; thus, even as CR increases, its impact upon EL diminishes: EL does not increase 1-to-1 with CR.

EL measures the difficulty of an encounter. If the difficulty of an encounter is doubled, EL increases by +2; thus, EL14 is twice as difficult as EL12; EL16 is four times as difficult as EL12; EL18 is eight times as difficult as EL12, etc.

## Behind the Numbers

The EL calculation uses a base-2 logarithm, so you will need to have a spreadsheet or a calculator handy.

Find the total power of each group (either the party or the group of monsters in the encounter) and apply the following formula.

$$EL = 1 + (2 \cdot \log_2(\text{power}))$$

Example:

6 Orcs (CR 1/2 each)

4 Ogres (CR3 each)

1 Giant (CR8)

The orcs have a total power of 3 ( $6 \times \frac{1}{2}$ ), the ogres have a power of 36 ( $4 \times 3^2$ ), and the giant has a power of 64 ( $8^2$ ), for a total group power of 103.

$$1 + 2 \cdot \log_2(103) = 14.373, \text{ or EL14.}$$

## Using Encounter Levels

Using the table below, compare the party EL with the opponents' EL. The table shows the chance that the party will survive the encounter, as well as what resources they can be expected to expend to survive the encounter.

As a quick reminder, the GM should consider that with evenly matched groups (equal EL), the party has only a 50/50 chance of survival, and even then only by expending 100% of their resources.

Obviously, the GM will want to throw weaker encounters at the party, so as not to overwhelm them. Multiple weaker encounters can be used to whittle down the party. The GM should use the table below as an overview of multiple encounters to determine how often the party will need to rest.

## Grim Tales' Gamemastering

Thus, a party of PCs could handle four PEL -6 encounters (12.5% resources each) and one PEL -2 encounter (50% resources) before requiring rest to recover their resources.

The GM can also use the table above to plan larger, mixed encounters by breaking the groups up into smaller units. Instead of assailing the PCs with consecutive threats as shown above, the GM could throw them a final encounter including a Henchman (50%), a group of Elite Footsoldiers (25%), and twice again as many easy Footsoldiers (12.5% x 2). Overall, this encounter becomes Very Difficult (100% resources).

- **Background Only:** Irrelevant and Impossible Encounters are referred to as 'Background only'; meaning that they should not be considered 'legitimate' encounters, but may be included to add flavor to an encounter, whether they are insignificant peasants or a rampaging monster of godlike proportions.
- **Fodder:** Very Easy encounters could be equated to mere Fodder, in that they will almost never tax the PCs abilities, acting as mere diversions or delays to impede their progress, even when encountered in large numbers.

Table 1: Using Encounter Levels			
Opponent EL	Relative Power	Party Victory	Resources Used
Party EL -12 Irrelevant (Background Only)	$\rho/64$	99.3%	1.5%
Party -10 Inconsequential (Cannon Fodder)	$\rho/32$	98.4%	3.1%
Party -8 Very Easy (Footsoldiers)	$\rho/16$	96.8%	6.2%
Party -6 Easy (Footsoldiers)	$\rho/8$	93.7%	12.5%
Party -4 Moderate (Elite Footsoldiers)	$\rho/4$	87.5%	25%
Party -2 Difficult (Henchman)	$\rho/2$	75%	50%
Party +0 Very Difficult (Nemesis)	$\rho$	50%	100%
Party +2 Pyrrhic (Major Nemesis)	$2 \cdot \rho$	25%	100%+
Party +4 Impossible (Background Only)	$4 \cdot \rho$	12.5%	100%+

- **Footsoldier:** Easy encounters often represent typical grunts who should only ever pose a significant threat to the PCs progress in sufficient numbers.

- **Elite Footsoldier:** Encounters of Moderate difficulty are dangerous enough to cause the PCs problems should they act in a churlish or overconfident manner.
- **Henchman:** Difficult encounters are epitomized by Henchman types. It should be noted that these opponents are virtually equal to the PCs in power. As such, PC casualties are a definite possibility.
- **Nemesis:** A Very Difficult encounter often represents a party Nemesis: an adversary that is actually more powerful than the PCs themselves. It may well be in the PCs best interests to run from such encounters unless they feel they have an advantage of some kind.
- **Major Nemesis:** The PCs may be able to win a Pyrrhic encounter such as this, if they are properly prepared, but even so, they are likely to suffer such heavy casualties as to invalidate the effort. As the finale to a campaign, where the PCs are not expected to survive, such encounters may be legitimate.

## Sample Encounter Design

Using the system presented here, the GM can quickly design encounters that are balanced against the party.

### 1. Calculate the Party EL

Find the party's total power ( $\rho$ ) and EL following the steps outlined previously.

*The party consists of four heroes (each 5th level) and their loyal dog, a CR2 great dane of unusual character. The total party power is  $(5^2)+(5^2)+(5^2)+(5^2)+(2^2)=104$ . The party EL =  $1 + (2 \cdot \log_2(\text{power})) = \text{EL}14$ .*

### 2. Determine the desired difficulty (EL) of the encounter

Use Table 1 to find the appropriate EL for an encounter designed to challenge the party to the GM's specs.

*The GM decides he wants an encounter of moderate difficulty (EL -4).*

### 3. Determine the total power of the opponents in the encounter

Using Table 1, look in the second column next to the desired encounter difficulty. For a Moderate encounter, this column reads " $\rho/4$ ."

Thus, the opponents should have a combined power of  $\rho/4$ ; in this case,  $104/4=26$ .

### 4. Purchase individual combatants from the power total

"Buy" each combatant from the power total, keeping in mind that each individual combatant contributes its  $\text{CR}^2$  to the total power.

## Awarding Experience Points

*The GM wants his encounter to feature a horde of punks (posing as flesh-eating zombies trying to scare the heroes away).*

*The GM can easily determine that none of his opponents should be CR5 or higher (as  $5^2=25$ , which is almost the entire power in a single creature!)*

*Three opponents at CR3 would have a total power of 27 ( $3^2+3^2+3^2$ ). This is about right, but he wants more punks.*

*Six opponents at CR2 would have a total power of 24 ( $2^2=4$ ,  $6 \times 4=24$ ).*

*He doesn't quite like that option, as he wants a lot more punks running around, outnumbering the party and creating mayhem. He decides instead to have a single CR4 leader (power=16), and to round out the encounter with a batch of mooks at CR1 each.*

*Power 26 minus the leader (CR4, power 16) leaves 10 power left to spend. Each CR1 creature is 1 power, so he buys ten CR1 mooks.*

## Awarding Experience Points

Most experience points are awarded for combat, but there are other dangers the PCs must face and other ways to overcome them. The GM can award experience points for vital skill checks and story awards.

### Skill Checks

Experience points are awarded for skill checks only for checks with a DC15 or higher and only when the success or failure of the skill carries serious consequences. A DC15 skill check is CR1; add +1 to the CR for each +1 increase to the DC. The GM may integrate the skill check CR into a combat encounter or award XP for the skill check as its own encounter (converting CR to EL as normal).

Skill Check DC	CR <sup>1</sup>
15	1
+1 DC	+1 CR
1 Add +1 to the CR if the skill cannot be used untrained.	

### Story Awards

The GM can assign non-combat, non-skill related encounters a difficulty using Table 14-4. For example, the GM may devise a "difficult" riddle that the players must solve in order to advance their cause, awarding experience as for a Difficult encounter. Or, he may present them with a moral or ethical dilemma, awarding experience points according to the challenge of the dilemma and his own satisfaction with each character's roleplaying choices.

## Designing Serial Adventures

Most GMs are capable of designing a "site based" adventure, such as the typical dungeon crawl. Grim Tales favors a different style of adventure, the Serial Adventure, where the focus is not so much on the slaying of enemies

and the accumulation of wealth, as it is on roleplaying, story-telling, and problem-solving.

Serial Adventures are designed to allow the GM and the players to live out the best scenes, stories, and plots of their favorite books and movies.

Every game session (and, in the larger sense, every adventure) draws from the same basic conflicts and methods of conflict resolution. Not all of these "cinematic elements" are always present, but the best adventures, stories, and movies have a good number of them.

### Call To Action

At the beginning of the adventure or the evening's session of play, the GM sets the scene. This is where the players receive some call to action; or, "the hook." A problem is presented and the PCs are encouraged to follow up.

**Task:** The GM must prepare adequate hooks to insure that the players will move into his adventure. He can always force the players into the adventure by springing an extra Chase or Minor Combat on them and forcing them to act; plan such proactive measures ahead.

### Research

In this phase, the players seek out additional information on their problem. This covers a wide array of "research" from rumors in the bar, consulting a sage, or even going online (hacking and decking) in a more modern "cyberpunk" campaign.

The key difference between Research and Exploration (see below) is that Research is a fairly safe endeavor; the PCs are not expected to encounter any resistance at this stage.

**Task:** First, determine what information you want the PCs to have to move further into the adventure, making sure to set locations where this info can be found and the methods (including skill DCs) to obtain it.

Next, the GM must anticipate what other kinds of information the players will try to discover. This is a great way to throw a few juicy red herrings at the players. Have an answer (or red herring) ready for every question you can anticipate. If you don't have an answer handy, the players will know that they are barking up the wrong tree.

### Exploration

In this phase, the PCs seek out some exotic or dangerous locale and scout it for further clues. It may be a dungeon crawl; it may be a trip to an old mansion or the graveyard. Exploration is, in essence, "field research." It may lead to a Minor Combat (see below).

**Task:** The GM needs to prepare a map for the location, even just a rough sketch. Mark where any major adversaries are located (prepare statblocks ahead of time) and where any additional clues are located. Your PCs should move through this locale fairly quickly. Not every area must have an encounter, nor even a full description.

## Grim Tales' *Gamemastering*

### Chase

This optional phase involves a chase of some kind: either the players are pursued, or the players are pursuing. A chase can end in a combat, but a chase is best used to add action when the GM doesn't think combat is appropriate—though a chase scene can be violent and dangerous without involving combat per se. Remember that the Chase *is* the scene, not merely a means to set up another scene.

Task: Familiarize yourself with the chase rules ahead of time and jot down any notes you'll need for improvisation. Know the terrain and any likely obstacles. Make sure that both the PCs and their adversary have the necessary means to make the chase cinematic and exciting.

### Minor Combat

This phase is used to inject some action into the session. It is usually a minor combat, easily won by the PCs. A henchman fits nicely into this phase—though, if the henchman is the major villain at this time (as when the major villain has yet to reveal himself), this phase calls for a correspondingly minor adversary. This phase can provide the final clue (taken by force) to propel the action forward.

Task: Prepare a statblock ahead of time, and be ready for the usual ways that such scenes derail. Be prepared for the PCs to flee, to capture their adversary, to negotiate, and even for the PCs to surrender or die.

### Preparation/Insulation

The PCs retire or retreat to prepare themselves for the climax. Because this phase is mostly planning, this is a good time in which to showcase roleplaying— a return to the scene for NPCs who rely on the heroes, NPCs who offer aid to the heroes, the resolution or extension of love interests, and so on.

### Climax

The final phase of the adventure. Here the PCs will come to grips with the "final villain." However, the best serials should end with a Cliffhanger: a scene that leads from the Climax of adventure A to the Setup of adventure B.

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# GRIM TALES

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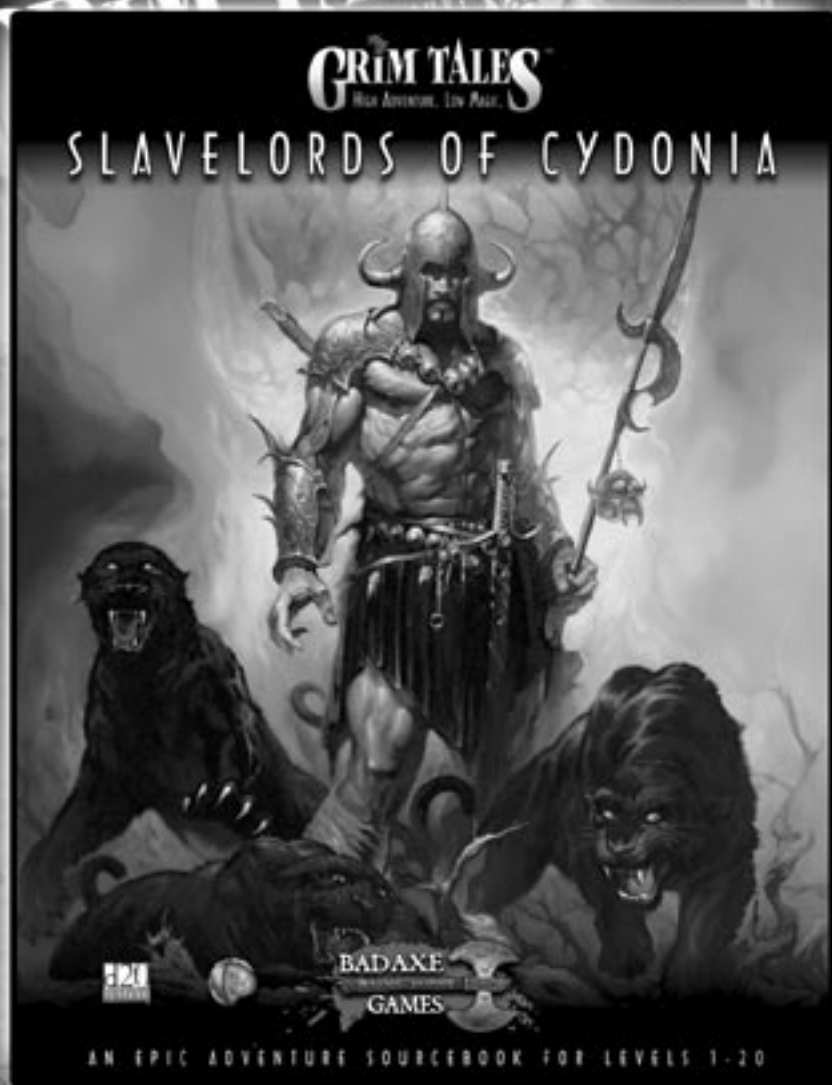


HIGH ADVENTURE... LOW MAGIC... ALL GRIT.

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