



Welcome to the Fourthcore (4C) Dungeon Masters Guide! v1

A baseline guide to making your game 4C.

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INTRODUCTION

So you want to kill some PC's? Well there is definitely a right and a wrong way to do it. Keep in mind as a DM you are first and foremost a judge, and that requires some impartiality. But this is 4C, and that means it's perfectly fine to smile with glee when another PC bites the dust! With all that being said, what I hope to present here are some good ways to make your own 4C modules & obstacles, that are still wicked difficult, but yet fair. That's the real trick. Remember this is challenge for not only your PC's, but for your Players as well. So don't worry about ramping it up, because the Players are required to bring their A game.

FAQ's

What is Fourthcore?

Fourthcore (also shown as 4C) is 4E D&D's version of an increased lethality tournament module system. It's a modification to the Base 4E rules which introduces a touch more lethality to the equation. On top of that puzzles and skills are more about player choice than character skill challenges, although expect character skills to be challenged as well. In short, it's a competition. Not just between your party and the DM, but between your group and other groups, between you and your fellow players, and between you and yourself. If you ever wondered how well you were doing, 4C will let you know.

What is the 4C Dungeon Masters Guide for?

Simply put, Consistency. This guide is about providing ideas and methods by which you can create what is called 4C content without going too far overboard. Remember, unwinnable is not fun, but lethal and challenging is! That's what's at the heart of 4C. The challenge.

Why would I follow the 4C Dungeon Masters Guide?

First off, you don't have too. Feel free to do it like you want too. But, if DM's wrote their material with some consistency, they could share that material so much easier! That way different groups wouldn't have to tweak things in order to play the content. We all subscribe to some manner of build consistency, so this is just a way that the 4C grass-roots movement can keep within the same sandbox per se.



MODULE DESIGN THEORY

So, how does one dish out death and destruction and remain fair? Good question. Well, there are certain ideas which must be kept in mind. First off, I can't tell anyone how to design their game. That's for you and your players. But I can give you an idea of how things can maintain a sense of fairness and still remain hard. The basic trick is to work within the rules of the game, without completely disrupting the basic fabric of the game system. For example, If a random lightning bolt hits a character and the idea is that this is supposed to kill the 1st level character if it hits, one tweak you can make is that instead of saying "you die", you have the Lightning Bolt deal 45 Damage. Why 45? Well most first level characters have about mid 20's HP, and the negative bloodied range provides about 30-40 HP. Ergo 45 damage is enough to take most fresh first level characters out in one hit. HOWEVER, if a player builds a character that has 31HP. Hit negative bloodied value gives him/her 46 HP. Whereby he deserves a big Kudos for design. Now I'm not saying fling 45 damage lightning bolts willy-nilly at level 1 PC's, but see how D&D mechanics work well instead of using the "you dead" statement. Same effect, subtle difference.

Secondly, modules should be designed with a minimum of RP in mind. This is because 4C isn't about story and fluff, it's about challenge. Make your story elements preamble and clue oriented, keep the monologues from PC's shorter and more to the point. Quite often 4C modules are used in timed settings, or for one-shot game nights, so things need to move as quickly as possible.

MONSTERS & TRAPS

Monsters & traps always have a place in 4C, as they are usually some of the most prolific obstacles. The trick with using these things is twofold. First off, they have to be defeat able, or used as a deterrent measure. Like a slow rolling unstoppable boulder that moves the PC's along, or a Giant indestructible slug which chases the PC's through the dungeon. Both are unbeatable, but the PC's must have ways or reason to avoid them. Unless of course they run down a dead-end hallway, then well,,,, squish.

Traps are an item whereby the resolution to the trap must be within the PC's means. This means not using DC's that are beyond the PC's reach to disable or delay. (they often forget the ability to delay traps btw). But they CAN be quite lethal, up to an including nearly instant death! A good rule of thumb is that the more obvious a trap is, the more lethal it should be. Conversely the less likely or detectable a trap is, the less lethal it should be.

Keep in mind that Searching for Traps is also a vital play point in the game. Perception checks for traps only cover a specific area; either by distance or by object. So don't let one check scan the whole room for traps. While one perception check can give you more room details it should allow you to discover all the traps. A good rule of thumb is that one check can cover an area and all objects in that area, OR one check can cover an object or surface. (such as a statue or the floor). In the case of a really large surface, like a large room, you may inform the PC that if he is searching for traps on the floor, he can only apply his search to the area he can see, or in some cases perhaps one search equal one quarter of the floor; that way the floor can be searched in halves or quadrants. Use common sense, lighting and furniture will act as good dividers in a room and help you make those determiners. Make sure your PC's know the rules of searching ahead of time so that there are no "I thought I searched the whole room" discussions when the throne clear across the room, fires an acid bolt at the PC's who stepped in the middle of the room; and the PC's searched at the entry way.

Monsters also have this balance act which needs to be monitored. One 4E factor that already works is that Minions usually have really good To Hit rolls and Defenses. This is a mechanic which can be expounded upon, simply by ramping up their damage output. This is a very easy modification for Minion use to make them 4C ready. Mob's with more HP give you several ways to modify them and still keep within some sense of balance. But this is a more difficult trick when you are creating them for a party. Primarily you should base stats off of Monsters anywhere up to 3-4 levels above your PC's, but with some modifications to keep in mind. Below is a list of some ideas you can use.

HP Monster Modifications

- ◆ Really Killer Mobs, should have an Achilles heel. Some sort of weakness, be it speed, range, or some puzzle which can defeat it. This makes the PC's think, and keeps the game from being a beat down.
- ◆ Monsters that are equal to PC's can be given attacks which can evolve into deadly consequences, up to and including death itself. Progressive saving throws are one example. More on this later.



- ◆ Pesky monsters surrounded by traps they are immune too. These mobs don't have to be wicked evil to be deadly, sometimes their mere presence in a scenario is deterrent enough to let the environment do its deadly work. Swarms are a good example.
- ◆ Avoid instant death attacks from monsters, unless it's a core feature from a monster of equal level. This is simply bad design due to the fact it takes challenge away from players. By instant death I mean don't give a monster a way to fly across the room first, attack the PC's where they stand with an attack which does AOE damage on a miss that is greater to their average HP, and then be able to Action point and do it again. That's just being mean, and won't earn your module many Kudos for design.
- ◆ Make monsters either completely ruthless, or very smart. By ruthless it means they all go after X person who has done Y. Or they attack unconscious characters in order to drink their life force. Or the monsters know when to fall back and harass the PC's over and over at the worst moments.

RIDDLES & PUZZLES

Riddles & Puzzles are sticky items in 4C, especially if you are writing them yourself. I've seen some homebrew riddles so preposterous it makes you wonder if being on crack was the trick to decode it. So regardless of how much of a riddle master you think you are, before sticking a riddle into your module, pass it by a few folks and see if one out of 10 people can figure it out. Since an average PC party is about 4-5 players, this is a good measuring stick of its difficulty. If one out of 10 people can guess it, then there's a chance one of your 5 players can too. On the other hand if nobody guesses your test riddle in 10-20 tries. Start over.

A good idea for riddles is to surf the old web, there's tons of content out there to basically rip off, and/or tweak into something you can use. Remember riddles mostly challenge the PLAYERS not the PC's so it has to be something relative to your player's experiences and/or wits. The last suggestion is to build in either clues for the riddle within your module, or to provide answers the PC's can choose from, thus helping them "solve" the riddle through process of elimination or best answer reasoning.

Puzzles also act in a similar fashion. Puzzles, like Math, yes,,, I said MATH, are also great ways of challenging your players. Reasoning and logic puzzles can also be found all over the internet that you can tweak to your scenario and provide a good challenge to the PC's. One example is the good old, "one door leads to the next room, the other leads to Death. One door tells the truth, and one door lies. You get to ask one question."

Other puzzles can require matching of like symbols, or progressive numbers, or even relational puzzles like if A result in C, then B results in????

These can all have rather deadly consequences depending upon their difficulty, up to and including instant death; or in the least, dismemberment. =) But again, test your puzzle out on a few folks if you are making up yourself so as to be sure there is a reasonable chance the PC's can figure it out.

SAVE OR DIES

One of the things which 4E has seemingly removed from previous editions is the Save or Die saving throws. Well, that's not entirely true in a roundabout way. While Saving throws are still in the game, they don't often result in death. Well, that's one thing 4C brings back. Save or Die! The idea being that even lower level mobs & traps can inflict this deadly phrase upon the PC's, but again it has to be tempered with design purpose. For example: if a PC is hit by a first level skeleton, that skeleton shouldn't have 100HP and inflict a save or die with every hit! That's just ridiculous. You want to weigh balance and challenge into the equation. One thing to keep in mind is the players tier, Heroic, Paragon, or Epic. For example, in Heroic tier game, a single save or die, is probably too crazy to slap on a PC; especially at lower levels. In this case, it's good to use a progressive save that gets worse if you fail the first one, and then results in death if you fail the second. For example: a Gaze attack may cause you to be slowed (save ends). If you fail the first save you are restrained (save ends). If you fail a second time, you are turned to stone permanently; thus showing a two round progression, resulting in death. As the players progress toward level 10 apply some negatives to the minuses. If you are in the Paragon Tier, you could still use the two save progression toward death with negatives, and in some cases begin to use a single Save or Die, and by Epic level, the single save could apply minuses to the roll as well. The point is lethality is increasing as the PC's level up.



Likewise Traps can have the same results. For example, deadfalls, or collapses can fall on a PC inflicting a chain of Saves or be crushed/smothered. But the progression should be consistent with the tier of the PC's.

INSTANT DEATH

Instant death HAS to be an option in 4C. But it has to be a reasonable option. Only one thing specifically comes to mind balance wise that allows Instant Death without damage or a save.

That is, something has to be such a dumb decision so as to warrant its use. The PC who for whatever reason thinks he should drink the desecrated blood of the unholy priest to use the portal, deserves instant death from drinking the blood. Dumb, has a punishment. Or the PC who detects high necromancy on a portal yet decides to step through resulting in his skin being flayed from his bones, and instant death, deserves what they got. They should have tested the portal in some manner.

The basic rule for instant death is either it's a puzzle or obstacle that has a clue as to its purpose, or it's so obvious that it doesn't need one. If a single other player says "I knew you would die for doing that" your instant death trap was just validated. Congrats!

PC DEATH

PC death will happen in a well-designed 4C module. How you handle new PC's is ultimately up to you. In some cases, like a one-shot module you can choose to not allow characters from coming into the encounter while it's still going on. On the other hand you could decide that they can start at the beginning and begin running to the PC's as fast as they can. Or in a particular scenario you may rule that they are toast until the adventure is over. Whatever your call, there are a few things you should keep in mind in regards to 4C.

- ◆ Dead Players can still talk. This is one of the boons 4C players get. The broad base of knowledge from the collective party is to their advantage. However only the Player can tell you the final answer to a question or what the character is doing.
- ◆ Prepare ahead of time what your "respawn" rules are for when PC's die. Have this relayed to the players prior to starting so they also know the rules. This will affect how they play in many ways, so make sure they are informed.
- ◆ It's always good to have the Dead PC's come back no lower than the lowest level PC in your dungeon. In some cases I've seen players rewarded for their noble deaths (like holding off the monster so the party can escape) and they are allowed to come in at their present level if there is level disparity in the party. But otherwise don't go lower than the lowest level party member.
- ◆ Allow respawning players to use their knowledge of the module. This is a core feature of 4C, remember, this is a challenge to the players as well as the characters.
- ◆ It's perfectly acceptable to have a final section of a module have a NO respawn limit. For example, the final fight could be a win or start over type situation. That brings a finality & conclusion to the module which is part of the challenge. If you could simply respawn over and over then what's the point. Final showdowns should be final showdowns.

TIME LIMITS

Time limits are an added element that can enhance a game. But they should be used carefully. Keep in mind that combat has a way of slowing a game down and factor that into your module design. Some ways to use this is to provide a LARGE time limit, but subtract time for things like character death, or failed puzzles, or missteps. For example: if you have a module played perfectly which would take 2 hours, then place a 6 hour limit on it. (rule of 3x is about right seeing how the players didn't design the module). Then perhaps implement small minuses like 5 minute penalties for errors and respawns.

Also if you are allowing respawns with time penalties allow the party to vote if they want the respawn. This will avoid someone from just ding over and over to bring his party down. There are other ways you can enforce time limits without using a clock as well. Below are some ideas to keep in mind.



- ◆ Place time limits on an encounter by encounter basis, with a penalty if that time limit is exceeded. For example subtract a healing surge for excessive heat or cold, or start to flood the chamber which forces the PC's to move along or be subject to drowning.
- ◆ Have a slow moving monster or object chasing the PC's through the dungeon. Something that is very slow moving yet nigh unbeatable, so the PC's only have a little while before it catches up with them. Thusly they need to be wary not to get themselves trapped; which adds a little tactical spice to the grinder.
- ◆ Use rewards for solving encounters under the time limit instead of penalties for exceeding it. Pretty simple but it encourages speed for players who like loot and boons.

CHALLENGING PC RESOURCES

As a 4C DM, you have to design outside the regular box. One aspect is challenging PC resources. Adventurer kits and a good example of things PC's forget to either buy or use. Having traps and tricks which can consume or rely on such resources is good design. A mob or trap which severs rope is something to use. A vertical dungeon whereby multiple ropes would make it easier is another, especially if only one person bought a rope. Dummy Dummy!

Torches, candle, and lamps are another place mobs can strike. If one character carries a lamp in a dark dungeon, perhaps one mob can SHOOT THE LANTERN! If nobody brought torches, that should be interesting. PC's should be aware of what they carry, so feel free to have puzzles which require PC resources to come into play. Such things like a scabbard in the floor which is used to open a door, but it won't let go of the sword unless a thievery check is made. If failed it destroys the sword! Or fishing something out of acid destroys whatever you put in it in 1 round. These are great ways to challenge the party to think, and be resourceful.

WHAT TO EXPECT

First off expect a few moans and groans; particularly if you are introducing new players who haven't played 4C.

- ◆ Expect to have to justify a few things. You may not have too, but if you can (after the session) then you have banked a major boon in your design defense. Being able to defend your design is the mark of a good DM regardless of module difficulty. Saying "because I said so" doesn't usually make many friends.
- ◆ Expect to kill a few PC's, but also expect PC to surprise you as well! There are many skilled players out there who really think out of the box, and those are the ones you are helping create! So be proud of your little students instead of being disappointed they didn't suffer your planned wrath. Besides, next time you can tie up that loophole!
- ◆ Expect to be seen as "the bad guy". In a way embrace it! You are the judge first and foremost, but secondly you are representing the NPC designer of the dungeon and have to run it holding their interests in mind; and their interested probably include death and destruction of intruders!
- ◆ Expect to have fun. After all this is a game, and it's being played by willing sacrifices,,,,er I mean volunteers. Have a chuckle at funny deaths; remind them of the gruesomeness of their mistakes. But also enjoy their victories and successes, after all you were responsible for creating those too.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Finally I'd like to leave you with a few parting thoughts. First, this is not a mandate, these ideas are suggestions, always feel free to ramp up or down your own creations. But do listen to feedback, and especially listen to your players. After all without players your modules aren't worth jack. Secondly, this is your chance to really put the point into the spikes, so don't hold back on any deviousness. Just apply some sound logic and reason to your concoctions and always make sure there is a clue, or a chance for survival. Remember the goal is to challenge both the player and the character. Smart players will find themselves rewarded, dumb ones will find themselves another character. Lastly, as 4C DM's remember it's all a part of the challenge. Not only for the PC's but for us as designers, to design good content, which is imaginative, difficult, yet remains beatable. The biggest compliment you can get is from a dead PC who says "I should have known better" Or "I should have thought of that". That's when you know you've done something right.