



# BUILDING

A Game Master's Guide to a Homebrewing in the Latinx Fantastical System of Mestezia

# MESTEZIA

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Mestezia is a tabletop roleplaying game. Like many RPGs, Mestezia requires someone to be the gamemaster (GM). If you're reading this, that's probably you. Building Mestezia guides GMs in creating their own creatures, NPCs, encounters, and adventures in the Mestezia system. You don't need this in order to run pre-designed Mestezia adventures, but if you want to make or adapt your own, this should help.

The underlying guts of the system will be laid out for your perusal, the tradeoffs and pitfalls of various aspects of the system will be explained, and there will be a variety of lists to help you come up with ideas in your prep. Bon Appetit!

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# Narrative Roleplaying

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In theory, you could use narrative mode all the time, resolving all situations through roleplaying and the occasional dice check. There's nothing wrong with this. However, if that's the sort of experience you want, then don't make your players learn Mestezia rules. Almost all the mechanics are about skill challenges and combat encounters, and that's a lot of learning overhead to not use. If you want the tactical gaming experience that Mestezia offers, you won't want to use narrative mode all the time. So the key question becomes, when do you use it?

## When to go Narrative

- **To introduce something.** It could be an NPC, a location, or the whole adventure. The point is that you're adding something, so you want to give it memorable description and give the players a chance to interact with it.
- **To transition after a challenge or encounter.** After a skill challenge or combat, it's often good to have a change of pace and intensity to reinvigorate everyone. Plus, your players have just achieved a goal (if they succeeded) or experienced a setback. They'll need time to regroup and develop their next plan of action, and you may need some way to set up plot breadcrumbs for them to follow into the next part of the story.
- **To increase immersion.** In combat and skill challenges, the roleplaying will be interrupted with mechanical declarations and game strategy. In narrative, you'll can focus on bringing your imaginary world to life through description and acting.
- **To explore the story.** If you like funny or emotional vignettes or complicated plots, this is where they're absorbed by the players. And although NPCs can be brought in during other modes, narrative mode is where the players can interact with them most fully, especially with allies or neutral NPCs.

## Narrative Pitfalls

As useful as narrative mode is, the flexibility of it trends toward the following problems. Being aware of these will help you avoid falling prey to them.

- **GM Spotlight.** A lot of the functions of narrative mode depend on the GM talking, either to describe things or to play NPCs. It's easy to inadvertently hog the spotlight, leaving your players as a passive audience to your performance. Some GMs lean into this style and run their games as a performance. If you'd rather focus on the players, you can counter this tendency to put the GM in the spotlight by keeping descriptions concise and using NPC interactions to prompt your players.
- **Quieter players get left out.** In other modes, players take turns, but in narrative mode, vocal, experienced, opinionated, or outgoing players tend to put themselves forward and new, reserved, slower-thinking or quiet players often become more passive. Some players enjoy sitting back and letting others lead, but if it happens repeatedly, you'll want to check in with the quiet player and make sure they're not feeling uncomfortable or shut out. If they want to be more involved in narrative scenes and aren't sure how, try prompting them with in-character questions or addressing descriptions directly to them.
- **Stalled plot.** In other modes, the PCs are working towards a clear objective. However, in narrative scenes, the players might not know what next steps they can take, or they may get focused on a side detail that they wrongly think is crucial to solving a mystery, or they may spend time arguing out of character over what they should do. You'll have to judge how long you want to let this play out. You don't want to cut them off too quickly, because they may come up with something interesting that you didn't anticipate. I recommend stepping in when the players (not the PCs) act lost or their discussions lose momentum. When this happens, jump in with something happening in game that they need can immediately react to.

# Challenges

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A skill challenge, like a combat encounter, is a mini game within the RPG. The basic rules for skill challenges are described in *Playing Mestezia*.

## Why Challenge

From the GM's perspective, you don't ever have to use a skill challenge. You can make the same situations work using just narrative roleplaying and individual skills checks. However there are a few reasons to use the skill challenge mode.

- **Tactics.** Narrative role playing allows for creativity, and individual checks add randomness, but neither allows for tactics. Challenges add tactics into the non-combat part of the game.
- **Player focus.** There is no enemy side, so it's a completely collaborative experience and all turns are player turns. More so than in the other two modes, the GM can fade into the background and act as a facilitator while the players take center stage. As a GM, you can choose to push yourself forward, but a skill challenge is a way to get even your quietest player involved.
- **Pacing.** Challenges have a unique feel and pacing. It's definitely a game rather than a joint storytelling experience, but it plays faster than combat. Turns are less strategically complex and since there are no enemy turns, the rounds go by quickly. Also, it allows you to go through a lot of time in-game faster (in some ways) than if you had roleplayed it out, but without feeling like you just skipped over it.

## Combat as a Challenge

If you really wanted to, you could run also combat as a skill challenge rather than as a combat encounter. It would be a more theatre-of-the-mind experience than a regular combat encounter, but could provide...

- **A change of pace.** If the party is engaging in several combats consecutively (e.g. a dungeon crawl or war), then you might want to break them up with a combat skill challenge.
- **Abstraction for complicated set ups.** For example an aerial battle or a dreamscape with shifting geography can be hard to plot on a normal battlegrid.
- **Quick resolution for easy battles.**

## When to challenge

Let's say you want to insert a skill challenge somewhere in your session or adventure. How do you know when to do so? You should pick a situation where...

- **You can define the goal.** E.g. *"find the hidden treasure"* or *"Sneak inside the castle."*
- **Players could use a variety of skills** to address the goal, preferable at least 4-5 skills.
- **The whole party can be involved.** If only one player would be trying to solve the challenge, then it's better to treat it as a simple savvy check or two in roleplaying mode and move forward with the plot.

You may want to especially consider a skill challenge if you...

- Have been in narrative or combat mode for a while and want a change of pace.
- Want to give quieter players a way to shine and get engaged without singling them out as individuals.
- Want to give your skill-focused players a chance to shine.

# Creating a Challenge

The difficulty of the challenge on a mechanical level is entirely divorced from the impact or epicness of the challenge in game.

## Challenge Prepping

The ingredients of a properly overprepared skill challenge include:

- **Basics.** Write down the goal, allowed skills, required boons, maximum busts, and the check Threshold.
- **Rules doc.** Have a copy of the rules handy if you haven't memorized them. If you're really nice, be ready to hand it to the players even if you have memorized them.
- **Tracking.** Have a plan for how you want to track the turn order and ongoing boons and busts. It can be as simple as a pencil and paper or as complicated as a custom wood-carved tracker. Whatever floats your boat.
- **Variants.** If you use alternate rules (below) or challenge variants, have a copy of the relevant rules both for yourself and the players.
- **Failure.** Think through how you're going to handle it if the players fail the challenge.

The total prep time should be a few minutes plus however long your printer takes to print out the copies and however long it takes you to craft whatever you use to track things.

## Alternate Rules

The following are slight changes you can make to any skill challenge. You can either decide to make these the default house rules, or you can drop an alternate rule in on occasion just to shake things up.

- **Unrestricted skills.** Rather than restrict the allowed skills to a specific list, allow players to use any skill they can justify in-character. This gives the players more agency and make the skill challenge feel less artificially restrained. The tradeoff is that you won't be forcing players to use less optimized skills and thus make tough choices about which rank they'll attempt. They'll mostly just use their best skills and not worry about giving a bonus to the next player, because they'll know the other players will also use their best skills. To ameliorate this tendency, make the skill challenge harder by lowering the maximum number of busts allowed or be firmer about how

well they justify/explain their skill choices.

- **Banned skills.** On the flip side, you can be very strict about allowed skills. Normally you can use a skill off the list for a harder rank check, but with this variant, you have to stick strictly to the allowed skills.
- **No repeats.** Forbid players from repeating skill combos. Either each player has to use a completely unique duo (in which case you'll need to track all used duos) or each player can't repeat their own duo. You'll need to either trust your players or track what each player has already used.
- **Varied Checks.** Impose a penalty or bonus for using specific skills. For example, if there's a language barrier, perhaps all social interaction checks use one fewer dice. If the challenge is taking place while the characters swim on the ocean, perhaps physical checks have a higher threshold. On the other hand, if the characters are the toast of the town, maybe all social checks have a lower threshold.
- **Non-random turn order.** Normally, the turn order is entirely random. However, you could allow players to choose their own turn order, you could carry over the turn order from a previous challenge or combat (as if it were a continuation), or you could impose vary a modifier on the turn order rolls, such as the bonus from discipline or initiative.
- **Alternative bonuses.** Rather than having a Low, High, etc. rank check grant a bonus or impose a penalty on the next player, you can offer to the players a choice of something else tempting (such as a bit of info or a good or bad encounter) instead of a modifier. This can provide an interesting alternative for players. Or it could provide you with a way to insert pieces of the story that the players skipped over or missed before.
- **Delays.** You could allow any player to delay their turn, either once per player per challenge, or once per round. Delaying adds another aspect for players to strategize beforehand
- **Abilities.** If the challenge compresses time, taking place over the course of hours or days, allow players to use a ritual instead or in addition to their turn.

# Challenge Variants

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Although the basic framework can cover a wide variety of situations, you can modify the challenge format. Do this to give a change of pace by setting up slightly different tactical situations. When you use a variant, always be careful to explain the variant rules beforehand, during the declaration

## Timed

In a timed variant, the challenge ends after a total number of turns or rounds, rather than after a particular number of busts. Narratively, it represents succeeding while the clock ticks down. It works well for situations where something has to be done by a particular time, like...

- Saving someone from dying when they only have 6 hours to find or make the antidote before the poison kills them.
- Finding the groom before the wedding is scheduled to start.
- Making a sacred object in time for the annual ceremony.

Strategically, it changes the risk/benefit analysis. The choices are weighted toward higher-risk challenges, with Low rank checks being almost worthless.

You can track the rounds personally and announcing it to the players, but also consider using something tangible, such as removing tokens from a pile. When the pile is empty, the party's time has run out.

## Chase

The chase variant is a slight change on the timed variant, where the counter ticks down, but each bust means the number of booms required increases. Narratively, it represents doing something while the goal gets further and further out of reach, until it's impossible. This works well for situations like...

- Chasing someone. Each turn, they get a little farther away. If the party doesn't find their quarry fast enough, they'll lose the trail.
- Fixing a boat that's sinking. Each turn, the boat gets more underwater. If the party doesn't fix it fast enough, it will sink.
- Halting the spread of an epidemic. Each turn, more people are infected. If the party doesn't find all the infected in time, the epidemic will spread beyond your area.

Strategically, this puts even more pressure to gamble on higher rank checks, because if they gain one boom each round, the party will not make progress toward the goal.

Although you can track this orally, consider making a tangible tracker where the players can watch their progress toward the goal marker and the goal marker's progress toward the end. For example, this shows a set up where the party (P) needs to catch the goal (G) before the goal reaches the end. Each boom moves P one space to the right. At the end of each turn, G moves one space to the right.

## Stages

In the stages variant, each boom results in its own mini reward. Even if they fail the overall challenge, they still get something. Narratively it represents a gradual progress toward the goal. It works well for situations like...

Extracting information: each boom grants the player another bit of info from the person or people being interrogated. If your players win the challenge, they also get another reward, such as a one-time bonus to a Lore check related to the subject.

- Collecting items: each boom allows them to find another item. If the players win the challenge, they can also each gain a one-time bonus to using the items.
- Travel: each boom moves them forward to a new location. If the players win the challenge, they also gain some information or a friend along the way.
- Training a beast: each boom allows them to teach the beast another command. If the players win the challenge, the beast gains a one-time bonus to an a combat element.

Strategically, this can lower the pressure on succeeding. To keep it interesting, you can make the overall challenge a bit harder, or you can let the players know that there's an additional reward for winning the challenge.

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## Compound Stages

The compound stages variant is a more complex form of the stages variant. In this scenario, the skill challenge is an abstraction of something that the players work towards over time. Each turn represents a set amount of time, for example, an hour, a day, or several days. For example, it could be used for...

- **Wilderness journey.** To give the players a feeling of the epic difficulty and length of the journey, start each turn with a weather/wildlife report e.g. “Dawn breaks clear and bright in the bitter cold air. You see a few small birds among the scraggly shrubs and dried grasses.” And then each turn, the player describes one thing they did to help the party move forward.
- **Palace intrigue.** The beginning of each turn could mention gossip or the day’s planned events. The gossip may be affected by the things they do, but should largely move forward in their absence, plots and intrigues taking place around them that they can try to interact with or learn about. E.g. “The courtiers are abuzz with the news that the Minister of the Winds is hosting a ball game this afternoon. The Ocelot Minister has said he’s entering the game.” Each turn, the player could describe one thing they did to help the party gain favor in court, either in general or in reaction to the day’s gossip.
- **Investigating a mystery.** The beginning of each turn could mention another clue found or impact from the mystery. For example, “A runner brings news that another shrine has been vandalized. The locals swear they kept watch all night, but there was no sign of intruders until dawn brought enough light to see the damage.” Each turn, the player can describe one thing they did to help the party solve the mystery.
- **Treating an epidemic.** To give the players a sense of the grinding work and desperate stakes, start each turn with a something like physician’s notes, e.g. “Another three villagers are brought in raving and fevered overnight. This makes 14 in your makeshift infirmary. It should be 15, but one baby died last night. His big sister comforts his mother in your office.” And each turn, the players describe one thing they did to help the party treat the patients or develop a treatment.

In addition to checks possibly granting modifiers to the next PC, they can grant a mini-encounter or some other result. For example, a bust could result in a combat encounter or losing influence over someone, while a boom could result in impressing an ally or a roleplaying encounter where they find a useful resource. My recommendation is to allow the player that gained the boom or bust to choose which they prefer—the modifier or the mystery result—and to allow at least some of the results to be roleplaying or combat encounters.

Also, there is no winning or losing the challenge. The stages last as long as it takes the players to gain all the needed booms to achieve their goal. I’d recommend setting that number at twice the number of players, and then preparing beginning-of-turn descriptions for 2.5 - 3 times as many turns as players, to account for turns where players attempted low checks or busted. Also prepare at least half as many good results and half as many bad results as players. (You can always reuse them later in your campaign if you don’t use them now).

Since the skill challenge itself cannot be lost, you need to impose some other stakes into the challenge. The easiest way to do this is to have something else going on in the background. Perhaps a key event is looming, or they know the villain is on the way, or every day another villager is killed. They can take as long as they want to succeed, but they know there’s a price that they’ll pay for every delay. Another thing to do is to make the mystery result so enticing that they want to gamble for a chance at it.

# Combat

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In combat, you're trying to do something fundamentally different than the players. You're not trying to win, you're aiming to lose interestingly. You want the fight to last long enough that they players have a chance to try a strategy or two. They'll have a chance to string together a couple moves. But you don't want it to become a slogfest where they're just spending hours knocking down HP round after round. For me, this sweet spot of combat length is usually about 4 rounds. You also want to challenge them, to make fights neither too easy nor impossibly hard. Plus, you want to give them different sorts of challenges, so that they have to think about which power or tactic would make the most sense, and different approaches should work best with different combats.

## Why do combat

- **Strategy.** Combat is the biggest tactical challenge in the game, and the only one that really uses strategic (as opposed to tactical) thinking.
- **Opposition.** Mestezia is, by design, a heroic adventure. Adventures do best with villains and direct opposition, and combats are the part of the game that best conveys that feeling of directly pitting yourself against an antagonist who's trying to defeat you.
- **Badassery.** It lets players use their class powers. You could run the game without any combat, but you'd be ignoring a lot of the mechanics and not letting players really play around with some cool parts of their PCs.
- **Convention.** Players expect a tactical RPG to have combat. Disappoint them at your peril.

## When to do combat

Let's say you want to insert a combat in your session or adventure. How do you know when to do so? You should pick a situation where...

- You can define an enemy/opponent
- Players use physical actions to address the goal, especially if that action is violent.
- You want to interject suspense or stakes. The stakes in combat are stark—death or at least defeat. Plus, the results can feel much more of a gamble. This helps add tension and drama for the players as well as in-character.

You may especially want to consider a combat encounter if you...

- Have been in narrative or skill challenge mode for a while and want a change of pace.
- Want to give your players a sense of risk that affects them.
- Want to give your combat-focused players a chance to shine.



# Creating a Combat

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To set up a combat, you'll need to do the following:

1. **Find your inspiration.** Resist the easiness of generic combat. Have your combat be both meaningful and memorable. Vary your style of combat from session to session, both in terms of strategic format and in terms of tactical style..
2. **Choose the format.** The default type of combat is a straightforward, two party fight where both sides are trying to defeat each other. However, there are a slew of alternatives.
3. **Determine your budget.** The party has a combat budget based on the size and level of the party. The budget is a measure of how hard a fight they can handle.
4. **Spend the budget on combatants.** Once you have a budget in place, you can "spend" it on combatants. Will you choose one Big Bad Evil Guy with five minions, or a teaming horde of below-level combatants to enter the fight in waves, or three skilled combatants? You may have already decided this as part of your inspiration, but if not, now's the time to decide.
5. **Define the combatants.** What are their names (or what you want to refer to them as when you describe them to the players)? What do they look like? What style of powers do they have? Don't spend too much time on this part unless you simply enjoy doing so, but try to end up with at least a name and a brief description for each one.
6. **Define their powers, stats, and keywords.** You can use creatures from the setting guides or create your own. The section on enemy combatants has more info on how powers and stats are determined, plus <http://overpreparedgm.com/gm/create.php> has a free web app that will automatically generate stats for you.
7. **Define the Battleground.** Including terrain conditions, hazards, bystanders, and where everyone starts on the grid. Also, make a note of hidden triggers. You may have traps in specific locations or things happening at a certain time or only if a particular situation happens.
8. **What happens afterwards.** You don't need to have every detail covered in advance, but decide in general what happens if the party wins and what happens if they fail.

# Set Up Variants

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In addition to varying the goals of the combat encounter, you can also vary other aspects of the set up. Here are some examples.

- **Non-lethal damage.** Combat doesn't have to be to the death — you could set up the combat as a spectator sport, a practice duel, a joust, a way to capture or kidnap enemies, or just a beat down for intimidation. Running out of HP would mean the incapacitation rather than death.
- **Scripted phases.** Common in video-game boss fights, you can set up a combat so that it runs from one scenario directly into another. Perhaps the boss transforms into an evil monster when it first runs out of HP. Perhaps the beginning of the 5th round triggers enemy reinforcements. If you have multiple phases, consider rewarding player with FP at the end of each phase. Doing so allows you to balance each fight as if they started fresh. On the other hand, forcing them to continue through different phases without an infusion of FP can change how the players treat their resources and make the combat feel more desperate.
- **Incomplete information.** Normally I recommend giving the players have a fairly good idea of what the tactical situation is. This is a tactical game, so giving them enough information to plan and strategize makes it fun. However, sometimes it can be fun to set up the fight where the players have incomplete information. It could be that some of the combatants are hidden, that there are hidden traps, or that the combatants are of a type that isn't familiar to the players or which mimics a type that is familiar, fooling them.
- **Multi-party fights.** Where it's not just the party against the combatants. In this situation, success can be about manipulating the other combatants. The party may choose to focus on producing a stalemate between the other groups or on making or shifting alliances among them. Now, if you're going to have a multi-party fight, don't roll for the NPCs when they're fighting each other. Instead, have the PC's actions affect the turn-by-turn outcome of the NPCs fighting.

## NPC vs NPC Combat

In a broad sense, my advice is to generally avoid having NPCs fight NPCs in combat encounters. It slows down combat, relegating players to mere audience while you play solitaire turns. However, if you need to do it, here are three ways to handle NPC vs NPC fights.

- **Roleplay it for atmosphere.** Don't try to run the pure NPC combats as a game; just decide how it plays out based on plot purposes. Prescript how you want it to go or make decisions on the fly. The key is to not let the NPC fight slow down the PC turns, so during NPC "turns", insert short, regular, evocative updates for how the NPC side of the combat is going and then move onto the PC side. If the PCs may also fight the NPCs at any point, decide what the average HP loss would be and subtract that each turn. Otherwise ignore NPC HP.
- **Allow the PCs to affect the NPC combat.** Perhaps they use their social skills to influence the combatants or set up traps to trip one side. However they're involved, let PCs use their abilities and skills to push the balance of victory to one side or the other.
- **Allow the NPC combat to affect the PCs.** Treat the NPC combat as a sort of complicated terrain hazard. Allow their combat to splash over into the PCs with zones, stray arrows, and moving furniture, which a wary PC can avoid or counter.

# Balancing Combat

Balancing a fight is key to having a satisfying tactical experience. You want to give the players enough of a challenge that they feel like they have accomplished something and that it was fun but not so challenging that they are likely to lose. Mestezia handles this with a guideline for how much challenge a party can handle, called the combat budget.

[Table]

## Determining Your Budget

Your overall combat budget should be the sum of all the per-PC budgets in your player's party. For example, let's say you have a party of four first level players. You need to multiply the budget times the number of players (4). So the total budget is between 12 and 36 ( $4 * 3 = 12$  and  $4 * 9 = 36$ ). If you want an easier fight, have the sum closer to 12. If you want a hard fight, make it closer to 36.

If you have players whose characters are at different levels, you can add their budget individually. So, a party where two people are at level 2 and three people are at level 3 would have a budget between 23 and 61 ( $2 * 4 + 3 * 5$  and  $2 * 11 + 3 * 13$ ). However, I recommend keeping the PCs at the same level.

## Spending your budget

Each combatant has a "cost" in terms of your budget. There are five hierarchies of enemy combatants:

- **Standard** enemies are the most common. They usually get a couple at-will attacks and 1-3 rechargeable/special attacks.
- **Elite** enemies are more powerful than standard enemies. They tend to 3-5 rechargeable and special powers.
  - 2 x Combat Value
  - 2 x HP
  - 2 turns per round (at Init & Init -10)
  - +1 to Save Checks
  - 1 FP
- **Solo** (x5) enemies are the most powerful enemies. They have more (3-6) rechargeable and special powers.
  - 5 x Combat Value
  - 3 x HP

- 3 turns per round (at Init, Init + 5, & Init -5)
- +3 to Save Checks
- 2 FP

- **Minion** enemies have identical stats to standard enemies, except they have no HP. Instead they are dead (or unconscious) when they are hit for damage by an attack roll. Generally, you use minions in groups of about 5, and the combat value of the group of minions counts is equivalent to that of a standard of the same level. Minions are especially vulnerable to area attacks. If you have a game with only minions, it will be a very short fight unless. For simplicity, I also have the minions go at the same time initiative order..
- **Lackeys** are like minions, except they require two hits from an attack that does damage to take down.

The following table lists the combat values of a standard enemy per level. Note that the levels on this table go higher than the levels available to PCs. This is just in case you want to challenge your players with out-of-level opponents near the end of their advancement.

[Table]

The sum of the enemy values should lie somewhere within the total budget for the party. So, if you have an overall budget of 12-36, and you want to keep the fight on the easy side, perhaps you want one level 2 elite with four level 1 minions. Together, they would have a combat value of 17 (12 for a level 2 elite + 5 for a set of level 1 minions).

# Party Composition

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When you put together your enemy party, you can organize them in a number of ways. Here are a few of the most common.

- **Big Bad.** The enemy can consist of a single, very powerful creature by itself. It's a classic set up (defeat the dragon!), but it can be tricky for the GM to balance. By the math, the BB would have to be a solo, probably above the PC level unless you wanted it to be an easy fight. If you have a group that's good at jinxing and enemy control, then they can lock down the enemy pretty easily, even if it's at the high end of their level in terms of stats. However, if they're not and the creature is above their level, then it's pretty easy to create a big bad who can kill a PC in a round or two.
- **Boss & the Thousand Minions.** This is especially common if the boss can create or summon minions throughout the course of the fight. It seems like the Big Bad set up, but having minions lets the GM do two things. First, it lets you scale down the power of the big bad a bit so that it's still a solo, but at or below their level while still maintaining the overall challenge level in the combat. This makes the battle a little less swingy. Second, it provides more a variety of challenges, so you're likely to have more players shine in the combat.
- **Squad.** In this scenario, there's a more powerful leader, two somewhat powerful lieutenants, and a handful of weaker regular enemies. So, if you're putting together a combatant party, that might be an elite, 2 regular dudes, and a set of minions. If they're all at level 2, that would be a challenge of 36. With a squad, there are more enemies than PCs, but the power differential between them is more even than with the boss and the thousand minions. And since there are a variety of different enemies, you can have more different
- **NPC Party.** Like the PC party, the NPC party will be composed of a handful of specialized, regular-strength combatants, each of which is pretty comparable to a PC. It will feel for the players more like fighting another party of PCs. The NPC party usually has fewer enemies than a squad for a small to average sized party, but the power differential is more even than a squad, so the players need to evaluate the tactical style more carefully before figuring out which PC is handling which enemy.
- **3 Barbarians.** A term from Diablo 2, this party is composed of three powerful, specialized enemies. It's not as swingy as having a single big bad, but each is still tougher than a PC, so there are no pushovers to focus on to take out early. Generally each enemy in this scenario is an elite.

# Enemies

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Once you have a general idea of how you want your party of enemies to be composed, you'll need to get down to the nitty gritty and choose specific NPCs or creatures with specific stats and powers. You can choose ready-made ones from the setting guides, but you can also create your own. Mestezia has a system for balancing enemy combatants.

## Who to Target

In general, you'll want to target the PCs that the monsters would target, which is often whoever is the most annoying to the enemies. Your enemy combatants will attack the PCs that have recently hurt or annoyed them. If they're smart enough to reason, they'll assess threats and go after whoever seems the biggest threat even if they're not the closest or showiest. However, if you notice that some players who have been hiding and avoiding the fight, you'll want to actively seek them out and not let them skate by even if it may not be exactly what the NPCs would do. Also, you'll want to prey on defenses that appear weak on PCs if the combatants are smart enough to figure it out.

Strategically, the players should do their best to chase down your schemers and artillery and stand up to brutes, but stay away from twisters, and save soldiers and lurkers until the end. So as the GM, you'll want to make it hard for them to do this.

## Combatant Types

Combatants, like PCs, have tactical combat roles. However, the combatants roles are a bit different. They're designed to make an interesting tactical challenge rather than win the fight. So, for example, there's no type that specializes in healing or defense, since that would just make the fight last longer.

- **Artillery** have high accuracy and a focus on ranged combat. Like other ranged combatants, they can be vulnerable on their own, but if paired with melee characters to distract the PCs, they can attack anybody while staying safe.
- **Brutes** have lots of HP and do a lot of damage, but have relatively low defenses. They're most effective attacking vulnerable backline PCs in melee, but smart players will work to keep their squishy folks protected by defenders, shielding by magic, or mobility.
- **Flankers** have high mobility and a mix of melee and ranged powers. They're most effective using their mobility to leapfrog the frontline and threaten ranged PCs.
- **Lurkers** deal high damage and are characterized by their ability to hide or remove themselves from battle. They don't have the HP or defenses to stay in melee, but they jump in to do damage and then retreat to safety.
- **Schemers** specialize in applying conditions from a distance. They can appear to be artillery at first glance, but focus on terrain and PC control makes them more effective against the high-HP melee PCs, has plus their defenses tend to be better, especially their mental defense.
- **Soldiers** have high accuracy and defenses and are most effective attacking the frontline in melee, punching through the high defenses of melee defender and savior PCs.
- **Twisters** are melee characters whose powers focus on applying conditions positioning people. They have good defenses and can appear like soldiers, but their powers incline them more towards thwarting offensive melee PCs rather than defensive ones.

Note, if you're creating your own combatants, you don't have to stick to these roles. They're just provided to simplify GM prep.

# Stats & Powers

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If you choose combatants from the setting guides, they'll specify their own powers and statistics. If you want to make your own or adapt a creature from another system, use the following guidelines to balance them or use the Combatant generator at [\[\[include link\]\]](#).

[[Table]]

Thresholds for AC, Will, vs AC and vs Will should typically be about 10 + Level, but the table above has guidelines for adjusting it based on combatant style. Thresholds for skills should likewise be 10 + level, with occasional skill thresholds having a bonus or penalty of up to 3 if a character is especially good or bad

Minions do minimal dam and

Insubstantial creatures have  $\frac{2}{3}$  hp

Movement base speed is 3. A flanker or In Tier 1, an occasional NPCs might have special movement modes like burrowing or phasing, especially lurkers. However, in Tier 2, the PCs start gaining flight and other special movement modes, so NPCs should regularly have them also.

## Damages

If you want to create a power,

[[equations and explanations to determine damages]]

# The Battlegrid

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Although it's perfectly possible to run an RPG combat without a grid, Mestezia is designed to use one, specifically a hexagonal grid. You can use fancy painted minis on handcrafted dioramas or Monopoly pieces on a printed grid or anything in between. The use of a grid.

## Size

A small battleground will advantage slow, melee fighters over ranged and mobile ones; a large space will do the opposite. Melee range means within a hex or two, but unencumbered melee characters can engage within about 9 hexes. That's the distance a character can commonly charge into melee and attack in the same round is about 9 hexes, as well as a common thrown weapons reach. So if you're designing a battleground, keep that number in mind as a sort of threshold for when ranged characters feel threatened and combat feels closed in.

On the other end of the spectrum, ranged powers and weapons have a reach of about 15-30 hexes. So if you create a battlefield more than 30 hexes long, you should either plan for some of the space to get wasted or plan for one side or the other to be trying to get away. Of course, all this is assuming a wide open battlefield.

The other dimension to consider is height. At low levels, few characters will have flight, so combat is largely two-dimensional and height is only used as a boundary or terrain condition. As the party advances, flight becomes more common and the ceiling height (or lack thereof) becomes an additional constraint on the battle.

Hazards don't have costs since they're equally likely to affect either side, but a good rule of thumb is to keep the battlegrid simpler for inexperienced players.

## Shape

- Open Field
- Long
- Enclosed
- Chokepoints
- Arboreal
- Maze

## Terrain conditions

- Areas
- Height, cover, vision
- Traps & Triggers
- Conjunctions

## Other considerations

- Realism
- Weather
- Bystanders
- Descriptions

# Rewarding Success

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Sometimes the PCs kill every enemy combatant. If that's the case, then the PCs have won the combat encounter (cue cheering). However, sometimes the ending isn't this straightforward. If the party is clearly winning, think about whether your NPCs would try to get away or surrender. Have them act in character. Have a consequence for the win. Perhaps their reputation improves or they find the way easier. Maybe they have unexpected consequences, such as falling under suspicion by authorities or gaining the enmity of the family of the people they fought.

Rewards can take the form of XP (experience points) and loot. Mestezia has simplified XP and abstracted the loot and wealth, so rewards are no longer as integral to the mechanics as they are in many tactical RPGs. Nonetheless, you still want to reward players

## What to reward

- **XP.** Part of the fun of the game is leveling up, and XP is how it happens.
- **FP.** To replenish the resources used by the players and to
- **In-game rewards.**

## How to Reward

- **At the end of an encounter.** Replenish their FP so they can keep going onto the next encounter.
- **At the end of a session.** Take a few minutes to highlight what they accomplished and award XP for it. This is a good way to sum up the session, end the session on a high note, and emphasize what you want the players to concentrate on.
- **When the players reach a milestone.** Plan in-game rewards for them that fit into the plot. Personalize any items or treasure and have it make sense that their PCs get that treasure. Make it clear if they receive less tangible rewards, like the favor of a powerful being or improved relations with an institution.
- **As a party.** Try not to reward one player and not the others in the group.

## Why to Reward

- **Its Expected.** Players, especially those who have played in other systems, generally expect rewards and advancement as they adventure. Disappoint players at your peril!
- **To encourage specific behavior.** It's a form of "show, don't tell" or "put your money where your mouth is." The best way to encourage players to play a certain way is through positively reinforcing the behavior you want. If you give them rewards for things, they'll know that those things are what they should be doing.
- **To give players a sense of accomplishment.** People who like tactical games tend to like overcoming challenges. Rewarding a player for achieving something makes it clear that whatever they did was
- **To provide new feats & abilities.** It's fun to over the course of a long campaign to learn new abilities and figure out new ways to use them.
- **To refresh the resource economy.** Players are expected to use up consumable resources like surges and FP, and so as the GM, you want to refresh their supply so that they can continue to use their powers. Forcing the players to deal with dwindling resource may be a fun occasional challenge, but the game assumes a flow of these resources, and if you don't refresh the players' supply, magic users and melee fighters in particular will be at a big disadvantage.



# Judging Rewards

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I like my games to be about  $\frac{1}{3}$  combat,  $\frac{1}{3}$  skill challenge, and  $\frac{1}{3}$  roleplaying, and so I craft my adventures so they have those rough proportions and hand out rewards in those proportions as well. If you want to have different proportions to your game, adjust the way you reward to match, because if you reward, say, combat more than roleplaying, then you're sending a clear message to your players that combat is important in your game than roleplaying. And they will probably adjust their approach accordingly.

**Successful Encounters.** If your players win a combat or succeed in a skill challenge, they should get rewards. As a rule of thumb, each skill challenge or combat should be worth about 3 XP per player. If it's an exceptionally hard encounter, you may want to grant 4XP. An exceptionally easy one may be worth 2 XP. In addition, you'll want to replenish the resources they used. As a rule of thumb, I'd grant each player 5 FP for an ordinary combat and 1 FP for an ordinary skill challenge, but you may find your players running through resources faster or slower than that pace.

**Unsuccessful Encounters.** Although the players didn't achieve their goals, you still should consider replenishing their FP and giving them some XP, perhaps one point less than you would have for a successful encounter. In-game, failure is a harsh but time-tested teacher, and out-of-game, you don't want your players to get caught in a death spiral of decreasing resources resources to try to attempt increasingly difficult challenges (because being unsuccessful will mean digging themselves out of a story hole as well).

**Story Milestones.** Reward players for achieving narrative milestones. Perhaps they've spent enough time in the settlement that they accept you as one of the locals or maybe they figured out a key aspect of the mystery. The exact reasoning may vary, but in general, the story reward should focus on the narrative roleplaying part of the adventure. On their interactions with each other, with the NPCs, and with the world.

Keep in mind that the most important question you should be asking yourself about XP isn't "how hard was that fight" but instead "how quickly should the PCs be leveling up." You want them to level up slowly enough to give them time to master their new abilities and feel like each level is hard-earned, but not so slowly that they get stuck in tactical patterns or

frustrated with the slowness of advancement.

Another word of advice: don't penalize excellence. If they take what should have been a normal fight and just crush it, then they should get credit for the fight, even if they made it look easy.

## Personalizing Rewards

personalization, variety, making it an adventure hook

## Examples

of personalized rewards & loot

# Consequences of Failure

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## Consequences

Sometimes, the PCs lose. The possibility of losing provides stakes and dramatic tension. Provide consequences for losing—a loss of reputation that the party will have to win back, a setback in an investigation, capture by enemies. You want players to feel like they're in a worse position than they would have been had they won. However, you don't want loss to end the game. Setbacks and losing should be a part of play.

With combat, be careful of always setting the "lose" condition to "death." Doing this limits how challenging you can make the combats, or can be discouraging for players. Maybe the enemies would take the party prisoner to ransom or use as a blood sacrifice later. Maybe they'd start fighting among themselves over what to do, giving the party a chance to run away. Perhaps the party could awaken later, imprisoned and stripped of their gear or just beaten unconscious and made the laughingstock of the town. Combats could be ritualistic or sporting events where a loss simply means a competitive loss. Or if you use a combat variant like an escort mission or capture the flag, the combatants could leave after winning, not wanting to kill the PCs badly enough to risk their own death after their goal was achieved.

And if the bad guys would definitely kill them but you want to intervene because you're not ready to kill them off, have the intervention be connected to something they did to give them a little agency. Perhaps the villagers they saved two sessions ago brought word to the cacique who arrives in the nick of time to help. Perhaps a powerful bruje they helped two levels ago needs them again and teleports them to him to receive instructions. Just don't intervene like this too often. Deus ex machina takes agency from players.

## Death

**NPC Death.** If you want an immersive world, then death has to be impactful. If an NPC dies, there are probably those who will grieve the loss or at least notice the absence. The PCs don't need to be confronted with the grieving friends and family of every person or creature they kill, but it's unlikely they would never do so. And the more they kill, the more they're likely to be confronted with those who miss them.

**PC Death.** Sometimes, PCs dies. There are basically three ways to handle this.

**Revive the Dead PC.** Have the party find a way to bring the dead PC back to life. It could be as simple as allowing healing spells to be used immediately after combat, or as complex as allowing the party to go on a quest to bring back the dead party member (perhaps with the ghost of the dead PC along for the way to whisper advice, admonitions, and try to help out while in spirit form). Pitfalls include

**Transition the Dead PC.**

**Bring in a New Character.**

# Downtime Scenes

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Downtime is time the PCs spend outside of the group roleplaying experience. If normal sessions are the adventures, then downtime is the rest of the PCs lives, trying to recover, train, shop, and simply go about their day-to-day existences.

## Why Downtime

- **When schedules don't align.** If you can't get together in your normal time, you can still get your RPG fix by acting out some scenes with part of the party or even with a single person. Doing a downtime scene means that the players who aren't there don't miss any of the plot.
- **To roleplay advancement.** It's fun to play out how a PC actually learns a new skill or grows in power, but it's often solitary. Rather than have a session where the PCs each do things separately, take care of party advancement as a downtime activity between sessions. Do a series of small scenes with each of the players that give the player a chance to flesh out the PC just a little more and make the advancement more realistic.
- **For a change of pace.** Sometimes it's fun to break up the plot with a little side scene that doesn't have any larger-than-life-or-death elements or implications. Perhaps it's a scene that just lets the PCs be tourists in a fantasy land or dig into the obscure backstory that is mostly irrelevant to the campaign.

## Things to keep in mind

- **Choose a medium.** Perhaps you live so close to all your players that you can cover downtime scenes over a casual conversation. Or maybe you and your players like to use Slack, Discord, or some other asynchronous communication app and can set up channels specifically for downtime. Perhaps your players are writers and you can just give them a general prompt and have them write out downtime scenes and email them to you. The important thing is that the medium works for your group.
- **Catch up in session.** Downtime scenes aren't part of the plot, but it can still be useful to summarize what PCs did during downtime to acknowledge its value and give the other players a chance to weigh in or get insights into the other PCs.

## When to downtime

- **In between milestones.** Downtime scenes are a good way to give PCs their in-character rewards. Rather than just saying "you gain X treasure and a +1," write out a scene where the lord holds a banquet in their honor and hands out treasure in thanks for their bravery. It can also be a way segue between adventures, tying up loose ends from one lot arc and setting out the hook for the next.
- **When PCs advance.** Although the Players Guide defines the mechanics of how a PC advances, you can choose how it happens in-game. Perhaps they have an ancestor spirit that teaches them skills when their ready, maybe they find scrolls that detail a new technique, or their God bestows a new power in a dream full of symbolism.
- **At home or in the holidays.** Downtime can be a way to more fully immerse the characters in the world of Mestezia, allowing them to build a home (whether literally or metaphorically), take part in holiday rituals, or just visit with family.

## Pitfalls

- **Overdoing it.** Sessions require prep. Doing additional work in between sessions requires even more from you. Keep in mind practical limits for you and your players, allowing it to be something which enriches the playing experience rather than becomes a barrier to it. Also, realize that the ability to take part in downtime scenes may vary over time.
- **Getting out of Sync.** If each player is doing things by themselves, the other players aren't involved and won't know what happened. Sometimes you can ameliorate this by having a recap at the beginning of the session, but sometimes it's better to catch everyone up through email or something similar. It's best to not have plot-critical elements in downtime, so players won't feel like they're missing part of the game.

# Typical Activities

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## Dreams & Portends

If you're a good, or at least a willing, writer, write out a description of the prophetic dreams the characters experience. Hand it to them so they can decide what it might mean and what to tell the others.

## Shopping

## Networking

## Research

## Learning & Leveling

If your players keep playing, you'll want them to level up. Mechanically, it's pretty straightforward. They train their stats and choose new powers, feats, or themes (depending on the level). This is sufficient, but doesn't really make sense in-world. Unless you want a pokemon-style world where

## Solo Vignettes