



By Arto Saari

## What is Advanced Fast Initiative?

Advanced Fast Initiative is a system-agnostic method for managing initiative on a new level of detail but at the same time, minding speed of combat.

The system aims to simulate the chaos and changing ebb and flow of combat. It combines both deterministic values with random values with possibility to configure their ratio in final initiative order.

The prerequisite is a computer-aided solution like a spreadsheet or other similar tool. The principle of Advanced Fast Initiative is very easy to port to any gaming platform. I don't see this as a problem with the rise of online roleplaying systems like Roll20 etc. that require help of technology anyways to run.

The second prerequisite is to hide the initiative order from the players. This may be a deal breaker to some groups, I understand that. It is not however feasible to expose the calculations and factors and randomness of Advanced Fast Initiative to players and think of them to make any meaningful decisions about it. Accepting the chaotic nature of combat is part of the package.

## Inspirations and acknowledgements

I name two sources that got me inspired to work on this. They are inspiration-only and don't share similarities with the actual system mechanic. Also, worth to note, I created this system for my own gaming purposes and use it with my group on a regular basis.

First, *Mike Mearls* from D&D presented his ideas of more complex initiative method. I think it was great and certainly what D&D can benefit of. Youtube link here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfSo4wVkwUw>

Second, the board game *Gloomhaven* is praised of its way of modelling action and initiative order codependent nature and disguising from players the actual initiative order.

I run primarily Conan 2d20 by Modiphius (great game!!), heavily house ruled, for example, this initiative system entirely replaces the system-as-written version.

## What makes it both more tactical and faster?

As designer, I go for win-win, not willing to accept that a more complex system is inherently also slower to execute.

The tactical depth is discussed in detail throughout the document but "why is it also faster" deserves an explanation.

Firstly, in a system where PCs can choose their turn order, there's downtime when they think of various possibilities. In a heat of combat, this could be considered meta-gaming to some extent. Players are unable to choose order of initiative in this system.

Secondly, in a system where players roll for initiative and continue to roll for initiative in subsequent rounds, the overhead of all players rolling and reporting their numbers etc. can be avoided. The initial turn may be, depending on your preference, like in other system but from there on, there is no more overhead (except for GM).

However, "faster initiative" is not the main purpose of the method, it is a side product.

## 1/5<sup>th</sup> of a Turn Accuracy

The core idea is to manage each turn in 1/5<sup>th</sup> of granularity. In other words, one turn for any character is "5 points in duration". It could be any other figure as well but I chose to build the values around this principle.

The initiative is run as a cumulatively increasing number. The one with lowest cumulative number is having their turn. This means ‘plus’ to initiative drops the character down the initiative ladder and a ‘minus’ modifier raises the character a notch. It’s a relative queue system. I could have had it reversed but settled originally on this concept.

This allows wide flexibility to manipulate the initiative order. If you add +1 - +4 to a character initiative, it makes them drop down in the initiative order without missing a full turn. +5 would mean a turn is lost completely. Similarly, -1 to -4 raises the position in the initiative and -5 would give an extra turn.

### There are no more ‘rounds’

The concept of turn-turn-turn and round completed does not persist anymore in a queue based system. It is essentially an ever-changing flow of initiatives, like you may have seen implemented in some tactical computer roleplaying games.

For an effect duration or time-events happening in “2 rounds” or “5 rounds” are a bit trickier to manage but there’s a method I’ll describe later that will help in that, possibly even enhancing tactical depth of duration mechanic as well.

### Initial initiative

Initial initiative should be between value of 1 to 5. Remember, lowest initiative number goes first. Having initial value of 6 or more would mean the character is likely to miss their first turn entirely compared to other characters.

For random initial initiative order, you would have to generate 1d5 per character. If his sounds incompatible with the initiative range of your system, you would need to re-work all

values presented here to make a turn be 10 or even 20 points in duration.

Personally, I don’t favor randomness in initial initiative. It’s much better to have each character shortly describe their combat tactic for the first turn is and use that as the initial value.

I put emphasize on ranged over melee to the extent it is often beneficial to start with ranged attack turn even if you are not a ranged fighter by trade. This is to mimic real-life historical conflicts where spears were thrown prior to charging into melee.

See below my selection of initial initiative values. To even further emphasize ranged over melee the gap could be widened a step or two.

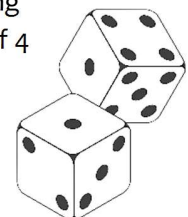
INITIATIVE MODIFIER	VALUE
Attacking prepared with Ranged	1
Attacking unprepared with Ranged	2
Charging prepared to Melee	4
Charging unprepared to Melee	5
Surprised	6

### Random variable modifier

Each character has as part of their initiative a variable random modifier that changes with each calculation. It’s essentially rand()-function that produces a value between 0 and 1 with as many decimals as required.

Note that this is a variable and not used cumulatively i.e. new value replaces the previous one.

The primary purpose of this is to act as a tie-breaker. Characters all charging to melee may have initiative of 4 or 5 for example so this organizes them automatically to 4.234, 4.453, 5.001 etc. As you can



see, spreadsheet automation is required.

The random factor may be either de-emphasized or emphasized with a multiplier. Multiplier of 0.5 makes the range 0 to 0.5 while multiplier 2 makes it 0 to 2. Higher the multiplier, more chaotic and unpredictable the turn order is. Values over 2, in particular 5 or higher, would not be practical as the system would start granting extra turns to characters by random.

### Alternating turns

Many systems today favor PC-NPC-PC-NPC turn alteration. It's practical because then two equally matched sides will meet on equal action economy basis.

This can be easily accommodated with variable random value: if character in turn is PC, all NPCs get a lower random penalty to initiative and vice versa.

From configuration point of view, this requires two random multipliers. One that impacts "your kind" and another that impacts "their kind", whomever is in turn.

I've used 2 for "my kind" and 0.5 for "their kind" quite successfully. This does not force alternating turns between PCs and NPCs but emphasizes it. If the emphasize should be higher, value up to 3 can work.

In practice, when PC A is having turn, all other PCs in the queue are stressed with variable factor between 0 to X (2, for example) while NPCs are only stressed with 0 to Y (0.5 for example) – this favors NPCs over PCs when sorting the next in queue.

### Encumbrance modifier

I think many systems don't penalize having lots of armor enough. It pays to be a full metal armored tank.

Initiative may be stressed per character with a constant value between 0 to 1 for example. I've calculated points of armor and divided with appropriate factor to have a spread between lightly armored and heavily armored characters. Further emphasize on encumbrance would stretch the range from 0 to 2 for example. Note that everything is relative: if encumbrance modifier is only between 0 to 0.5 and random modifier is 0 to 2, the relative impact of encumbrance is far less.



### PC to NPC balance

If PCs should go first or NPCs should go first regardless of their initial action, this can be represented with another constant modifier. I've used for NPCs an average of all PCs encumbrance modifier that happens to be for me 0.5. This means they are right in the middle between light armored and heavily armored.

Increasing that factor would have PCs go generally first in combat or vice versa.

For a particularly quick or slow NPC you can introduce a different ad-hoc modifier.

Note that I don't use Dexterity-bonus or similar but such would be very simple to implement as a constant factor of 0 to 2 for example.

### How does it operate?

Here's an excerpt of the spreadsheet I use. In the middle, the INITIATIVE is the cumulative running initiative with character at lowest number being in turn. Initial modifiers and

random modifiers are on the left side and on the right side are all the modifiers assigned to the character during course of the combat.

I have ten “slots” for modifiers on the right-hand side and I’ve never run out. If I would run out of space, I can collapse all numbers into one number and free up slots accordingly.

Type	Name	Enc Mod	Other Mod	Initial Actio	Rand Mod	INITIATIVE	Mod	Mod
PC	Voltar	0,24		3	0,054	3,294		
M		0,5		3	0,075	3,575		
PC	Roar	0,32		3	0,294	3,614		
M		0,5		3	0,146	3,646		
M		0,5		3	0,202	3,702		

After a while it starts to look like the below example with 6 PCs and 10 NPCs and half of them have already taken a turn. Note that while PC *Gonamir* is next in turn, due to random modifier, it’s not predetermined if PCs *Wigo* or *Rogas* or some of the unnamed Minions will go next. However, as this is a GM view only, only consideration is the top row.

Type	Name	Enc Mod	Other Mod	Initial Actio	Rand Mod	INITIATIVE	Mod	Mod
PC	Gonamir	0,65		3	0,138	3,788		
PC	Wigo	0,55		3	0,314	3,864		
PC	Rogas	0,70		3	0,275	3,975		
M		0,5		3	0,706	4,206		
M		0,5		3	0,854	4,354		
M		0,5		3	1,016	4,516		
M		0,5		3	1,547	5,047		
PC	Roar	0,32		3	0,069	7,389	5	-1
M		0,5		3	1,745	8,245	5	-2
PC	Voltar	0,24		3	0,296	8,536	5	
PC	Opion	0,70		3	0,261	8,961	5	
M		0,5		3	0,647	9,147	5	
M		0,5		3	1,357	9,857	5	
M		0,5		3	1,487	9,987	5	
M		0,5		3	1,072	10,572	5	1
M		0,5		3	0,807	12,307	5	3

Modifiers can be introduced at any time. Let’s say PC *Voltar* wants to accelerate his position in the initiative queue after having taken one turn. He spends a Fortune point and gain -4 modifier to his initiative, certainly pushing him in competition for next 3-5 characters to have their turn.

Excel spreadsheet specific technique: refreshing random values is limited to manual refresh of F9-keypress. Also, new sorting of initiative is performed only at the end of the current character’s turn and that results in next character being selected.

## Taking a turn

The one with the lowest cumulative initiative (sorted in spreadsheet) is having their turn and GM announces it.

The player proceeds to take their turn as normal and at the end of it, GM records +5 to their initiative moving them back in the queue. So initial initiative of 1 of a ranger with already readied long-bow becomes after his turn 1+5=6. This allows all other characters with initial initiative of 1 to 5 have their turn before ranger is in turn again – unless other modifiers impact this.

And on it goes. Cumulative initiative number itself is not interesting. They appear in the queue like 27.643 and 29.332 and only meaningful factor is the difference between them, which is not an active consideration.

In my latest iteration, I added “bad turn” graceful modifier that instead of being +5 the turn is recorded as +4. It is 4/5<sup>th</sup> of a round, allowing the character to jump a step or two potentially in the initiative order. Rolling a missed attack is boring and it’s only fair that your next turn comes just a little earlier.

## Variable turn length

You could have variable turn length ranging from 3 to 7 perhaps. A quick turn is 3 and a slow turn is 7. That already allows a character to do two quick turns before the slow turn character gets their next turn.

I’ve not used this but it is possible within the system. I would suggest using 4 to 6 range with 5 still being most common.

## Reactions

Reacting to other characters like defending, parrying or taking infamous attack of opportunity can be associated with an initiative cost. For example, I use +1 for each parry and dodge for all characters. This means

if you would defend up to five times between your turns you actually lose your next turn or it is consumed by the character defending.

This can be compensated also with other modifiers presented later in this document.

## Effects and conditions

Where the system really starts to make sense are effects and conditions. Being knocked down, stunned etc. can all apply an initiative



modifier. Stunned +1 means a small impact to initiative order while stunned +5 would make the character skip their next turn altogether. This allows a new

tactical depth with subtle but meaningful factors.

Also, spell effects like Hastened could provide a modifier of -2 or -4 for example. This moves the character up in the queue. You may repeat this after their turn for a more continuous effect. Or maybe the character is given 2 or 3 tokens they can use to gain -2 at any time.

## Off-turn actions

Being able to do something outside your turn is fun and adds tactical depth. I've allowed a "minor action" (as in terms of minor vs. major action) taken off-turn with the initiative penalty of +3 recorded for the character.

## Aiding other characters

Collaborative nature of combat can be further enhanced if character actions can help their allies to gain better initiative advantage. This is highly contextual of course but rewarding an ally with -1 or -2 as a result is a nice perk provided by the system.

## Consumables

Many systems offer tokens etc. that characters, especially PCs, can use to gain

benefits. These are the limited resources that are various pools, fortune points, compels etc.

Spending consumables are in heart of the initiative system.

A greater consumable like a fortune point that players have 1 to 3 per gaming session should grant when spent a high bonus to their initiative, all up to -5 which gives them extra turn essentially.

A lesser consumable could provide -1 or -2 respectively.

Alternatively, if consumables work against the opposition they can be used to inflict a penalty of +1 or +2.

This is all very game system dependent of course.

## Introducing new characters

As cumulative initiative runs each turn higher and higher, there needs to be a method how to introduce new characters mid-combat. I've used current average as their initial initiative. This means that if the whole queue average cumulative initiative is 32.543 I can use number 32 at ease. If I want the character to act a bit earlier or later, I can adjust that by +/- 1 or 2.

## Death or "exit" of a character

This is simple of course- just delete their row. Alternatively, they can be put out of action with a modifier of 100 for example.

I have in my spreadsheet template listed 10 NPCs for any situation but they are recorded as initial initiative 100 and I only use the rows I really need in that encounter.

Tracking health, number of minions, effects etc. is an added bonus of a spreadsheet. The whole combat is tracked in a single sheet.

## Timed-events

Let's say a spell is in effect for "3 rounds" from when it's being cast. The concept of a round in a queue system is not that straight forward.

The simplest system is to track it according to the caster (or target) turns as normal. If that character's initiative is changed however the duration is adjusted accordingly. For most gamers, this should not be an issue.



A more advanced system would be to introduce a new "character" to the initiative ladder that is the spell going off (or similar timed event). The initiative of this is caster's cumulative initiative + duration in rounds \* 5. If the caster is at initiative 47 at the end of his round when he casts the spell, the spell goes off at initiative  $47+15=62$ .

This advanced system is useful for timed events only if they can be influenced. Let's say a bomb goes off or a door slams shut in approximately 3 turns from beginning of the combat, at cumulative initiative of 15. Character actions may delay or hasten this event with +/- modifiers like with any other initiative modifier. This added tactical depth may be fun and useful benefit of the advanced initiative tracking.

## Player chosen initiative order

Under special circumstances a certain order of player character turns is required. I had a combat scenario starting in a situation where all player characters were lined up in a tight corridor, blocking path both forward and backward.

This situation can be handled so that no matter which PC's turn comes up, GM announces "next PC of your choosing". This

allows players to choose the PC to be in turn without impacting the dynamic between PCs and NPCs. The turn is recorded for the player who actually took the turn (as +5 modifier). Once the special circumstances are lifted the flow may operate as normal.

## My modifiers

Here's my list of modifiers I've used. I have additionally some limitations and rules on their usage and timing. For example, a Fortune point (a greater token that each PC has three in beginning of a session) can be used even when an NPC turn is announced and force a reshuffle so it works as a potential interception mechanic. The effects can be cumulative so suffering multiple times from a stagger effect yields a cumulative initiative modifier.

TYPE	INITIATIVE MODIFIER	VALUE
<b>BACK IN INITIATIVE ORDER</b>		
Action	Taking a normal / bad turn	+5 / +4
Action	Passing your turn	+3
Action	Off-turn minor action	+3
Reaction	Attack of opportunity	+1
Reaction	Defense (Parry/Dodge)	+1,5
Reaction	Parrying (with Parry Quality)	+1
Effect	Knockdown	+1
Effect	Stagger (per effect)	+1
Effect	Complication (GM option)	+2
Effect	Hindered (per effect)	+2
<b>FRONT IN INITIATIVE ORDER</b>		
Spend	Doom/Momentum (any character, once per turn)	-1
Spend	Fortune (anytime, even before NPC turn)	-4 you / -1 one ally
Action	Aided by an ally succesfully	-1 / -2

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