

Elegant

INITIATIVE
DESIGN



Elegant turn order design

Elegant turn order design explores different mechanisms that model role-playing game character action sequencing.

Most commonly actions are taken in turns. Turns are born of necessity as real-time or simultaneous activity modelling would be impractical for table top game play.

Turns are not however the most elegant way to model the dynamic nature of play. Within the solid frame of turns can be found subtle nuances that don't break the foundation but increase the flexibility and adaptability of the system.

A key consideration is how the focus moves between characters and their actions. You can think of it like a camera pointing to a selected character at a time. For example, in a classic initiative order the focus moves semi-randomly between characters based on their initiative.

A few additional design considerations

Initiative or turn order systems are either deterministic or random or a hybrid of these two.

Deterministic models are more tactical and engaging but suffer from overhead and ability to do calculated decisions.

Random models are fast and fun (?) but can appear as chaotic and at times illogical and uncontrollable.

The best models, in my opinion, combine multiple factors but in an elegant way minimizing the overhead.

The turn structure i.e. what a character can do within a turn is an important factor. For example, if a character can attack twice during his turn, being early and going often is a multiplied benefit.

LET'S GET TO IT

Classic initiative turn order

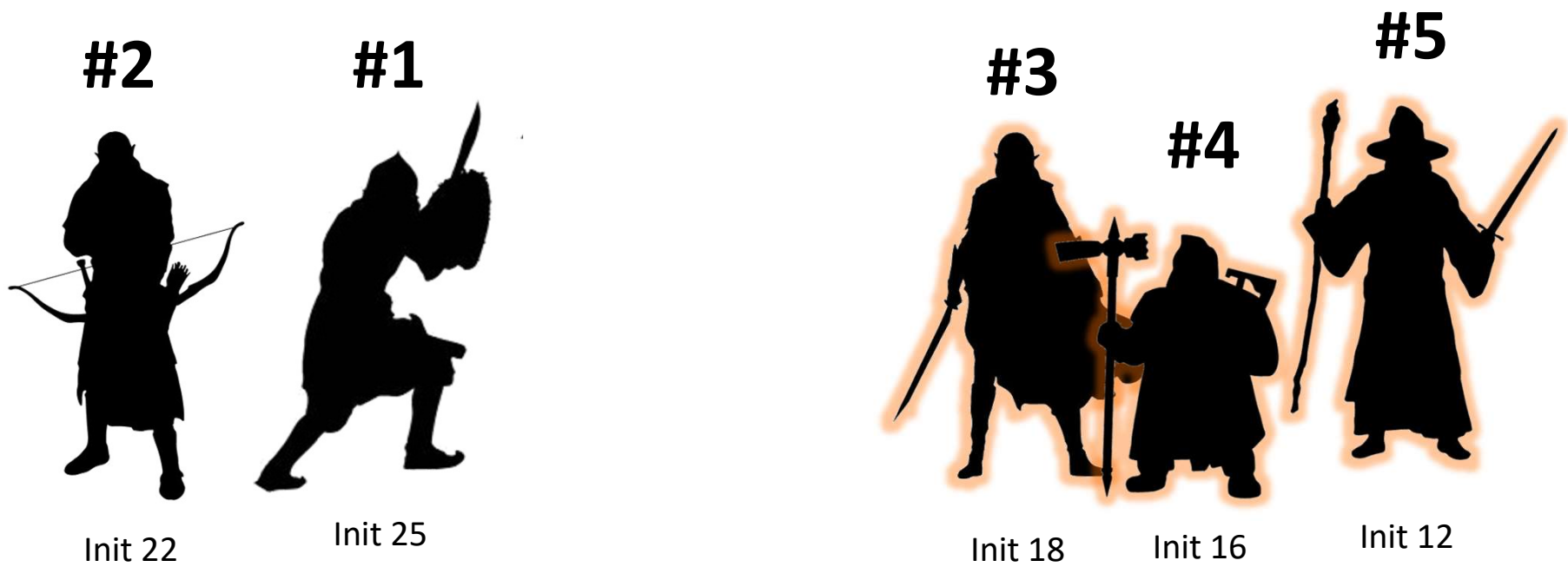
This requires little to no introduction. Characters take their turn in initiative value order from highest to lowest.

The method of how the initiative is determined impacts little the actual mechanism.

Often high level of randomness is used, making the action sequence unpredictable but once rolled, deterministic. This means it is random but only in the phase of creating the sequence.

That said, initiative re-roll or modifiers are all valid sub-mechanisms and they may impact the on-going round or the next.

As it is probably the most popular turn order system in use, it cannot be all bad. But I have a notion that you are reading this document to dig deeper...



Initiative value determines the turn order

Action-based turn order

Alternative to high randomness of “roll for initiative” is the action-based turn order.

This system essentially surveys each character for their action type on high level and assigns initiative value based on action chosen.

Quick actions like shooting a bow may happen before slower actions like spellcasting and charging a distance to melee.

The higher sensitivity to action lead time and duration is paid with the overhead of needing to determine and, as least in part, fixing the actions beforehand.

What are you planning to do Simon?

What are you planning to do Roger?

#1



Init 20

#2



Init 15

#3



Init 16

#4



Init 14

#5



Init 10

Initiative values are assigned per action chosen

Action-based delay system

Alternative action-based system is to delay the characters next turn based on the action taken.

The initial initiative may be established using a random method or the first round may use action intentions as the baseline values.

A level of randomness applied on top of action-based system prevents too calculative and rigid turn order.

Note that this puts fast characters into significant advantage over slow characters. A ranger happy to loose an arrow after another will have more actions than a spell caster.

Whether the variable turn length is capped to one turn per round or not impacts the above bias further.

I shot an arrow

#1



Init 20

#2



Init 15

I attacked in
melee

#3



#4

#5



Initiative values are redefined for
the next round based on the
previous action

Free choice turn order

Free choice turn order refers to players choosing their turn order or their turn order is fixed based on their attributes etc.

This allows best tactical planning without being influenced by randomness of initiative.

It is prone to overhead if players start to plan too much in detail each round of combat. A timer etc. may be used to create sense of urgency to player planning.

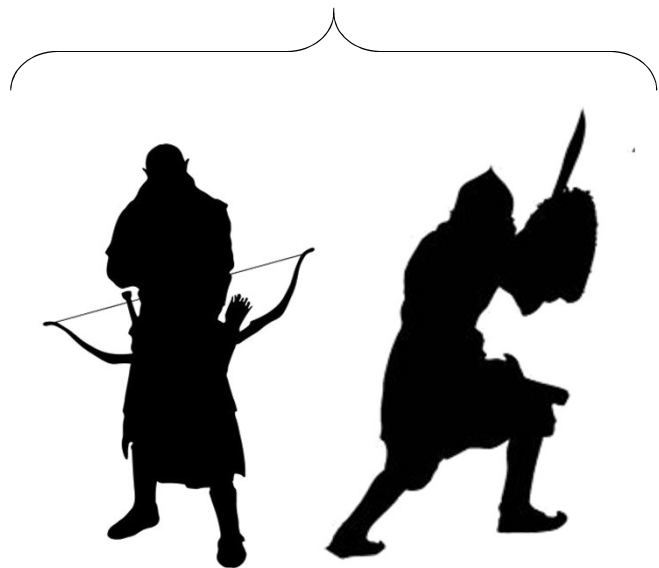
The suggested method is that all player characters take their action and then it is NPC turn. It is not impossible however to do alternating turn order in this method as well.

Who goes first?
Who goes second?

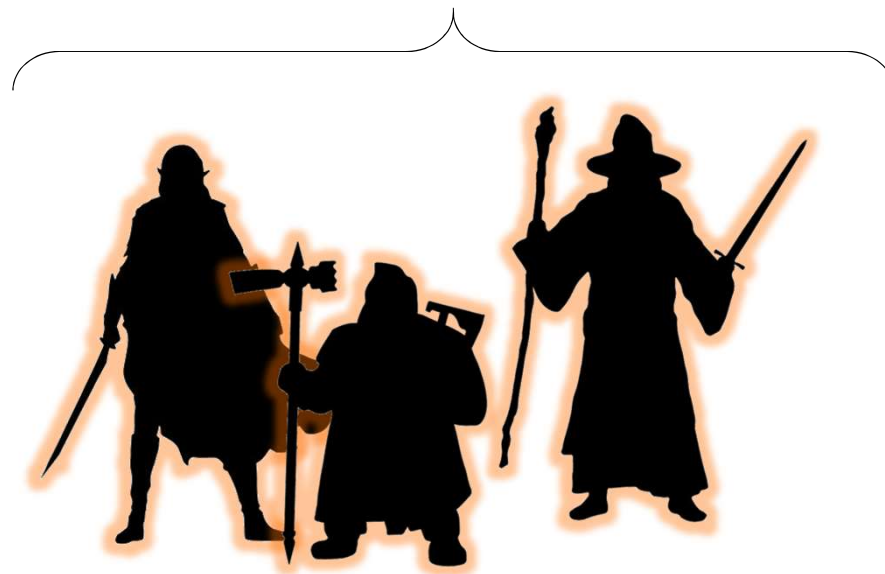
#1

#2

PC group



Enemy group



Queue systems

Queue systems are interesting as they model the order the characters and allow this to be impacted by various actions. It's my personal preferred system.

Queue system requires visualization of the queue at all times to provide it the tactical depth it deserves.

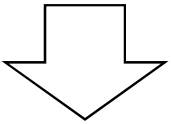
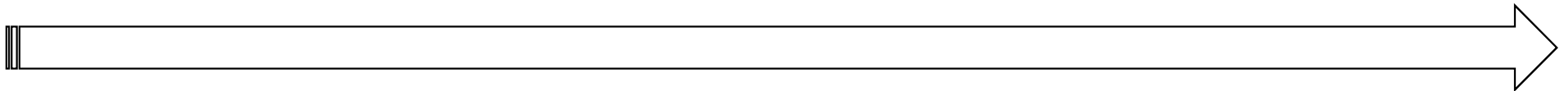
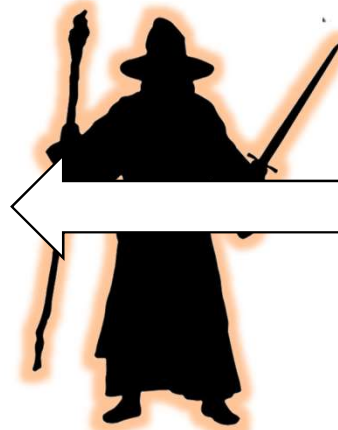
Also, this requires mechanisms that interact with the queue, otherwise it is not any different than the classic initiative order.

The queue may be relative (one character after another) or operate on a scoring range like initiative values.

I've covered this in my title "Advanced Fast Initiative" in great detail if you are interested. I run my games with "action-based initiative queue with pinch of randomness and weighting on turn altering modified by selected purchases". Yes, I need an automated spreadsheet for that level of complexity.

The character in turn takes their action and goes steps back in the queue

Characters in queue may be pushed and pulled depending on actions



Group-based turns / rounds

Instead of individual character turns, group-based models aggregate all characters belonging to the same group forming a single unit.

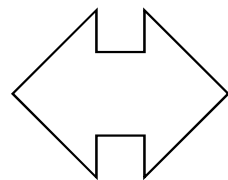
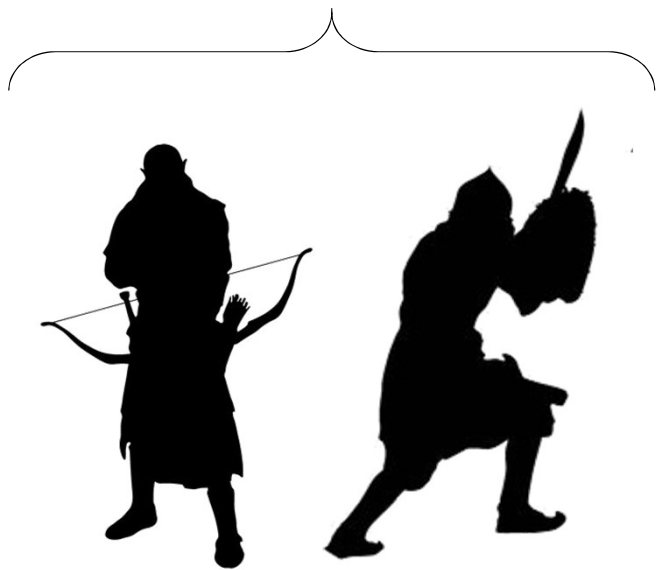
This is very game system specific design choice and not easy to adapt to individual turn systems.

Individual attributes, die rolls and tactics may still impact the group performance and total power level of the group.

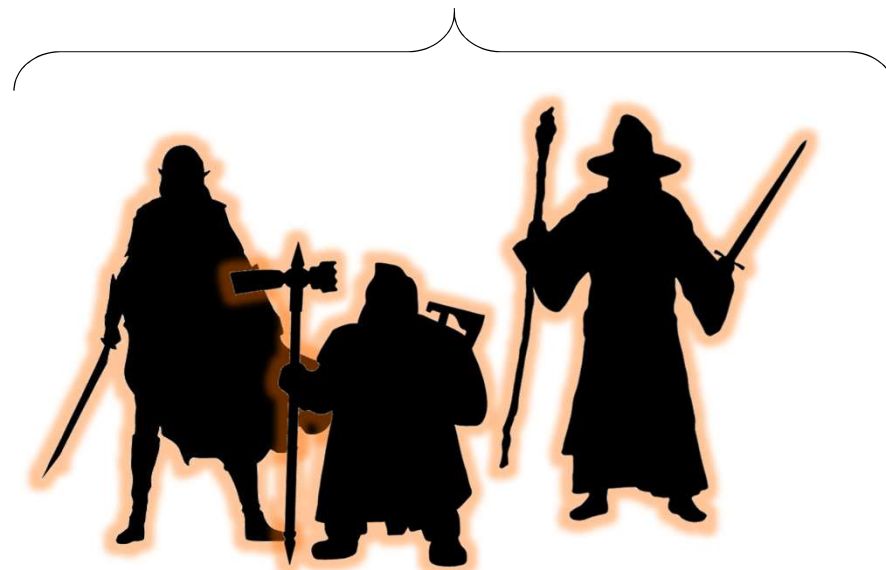
The advantage is very fast resolution and reduced downtime for the players with the cost of lessened individual focus.

Whether groups take turns or act simultaneously in the round are both available options.

PC group



Enemy group



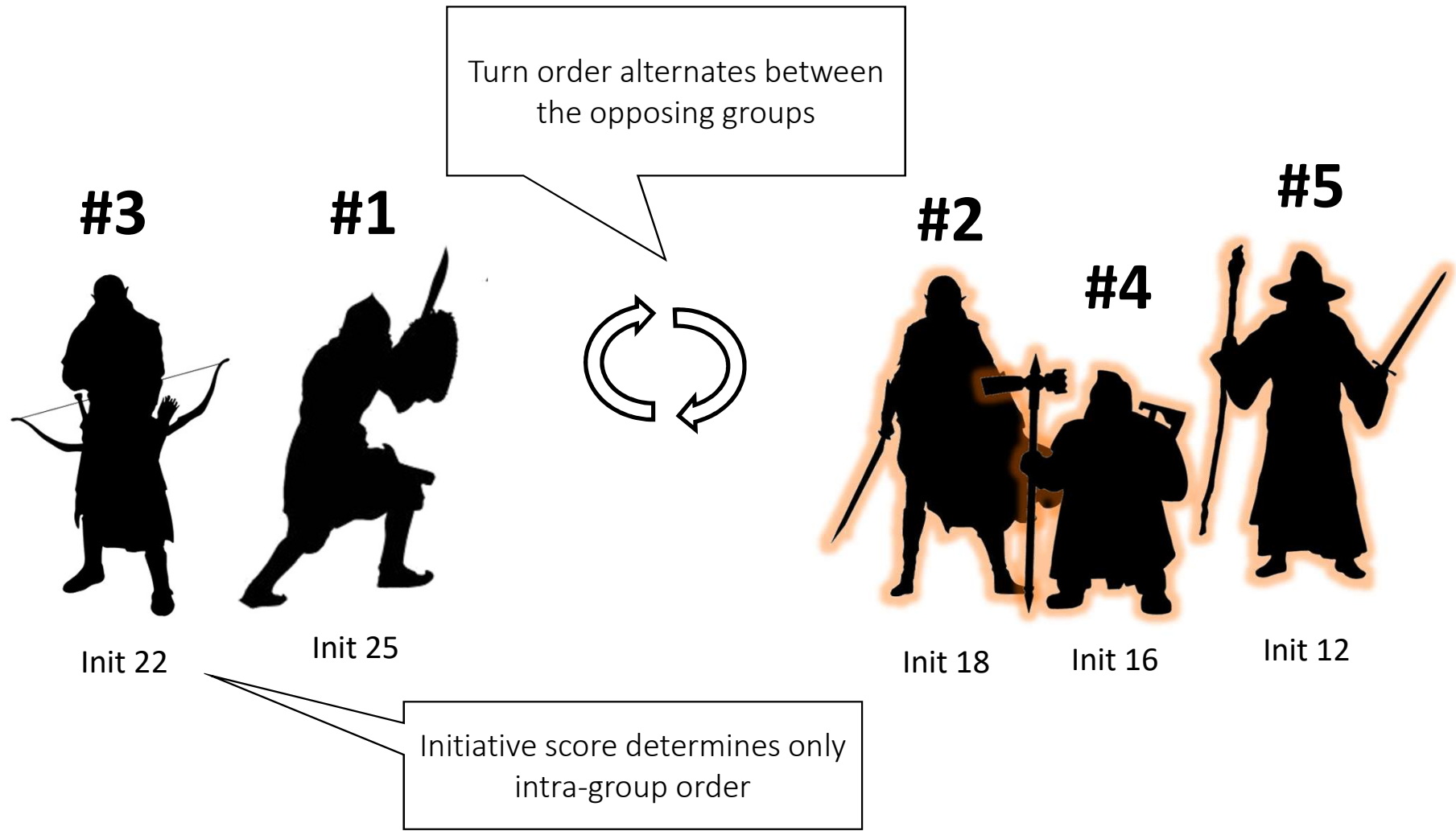
Alternating turn order

Alternating turn order has one character per opposing groups take action at a time in round-robin fashion.

This mechanism balances the action economy between the parties favoring a larger group.

Initiative order within a group can be managed by a deterministic model or a random model.

Alternating order however makes all encounters look more 'average' and stale as there is no great dynamic difference on which characters get to act first.



Bidding system for turns

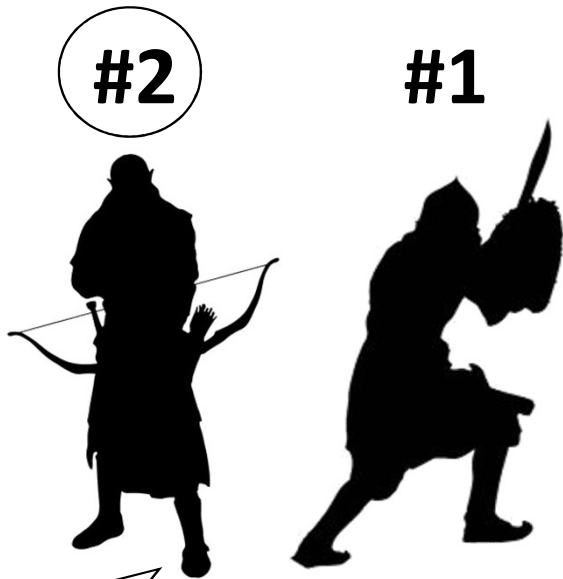
A resource or currency can be used to “purchase” a turn.

The resource may be of any kind and it can be per character or per group shared pool.

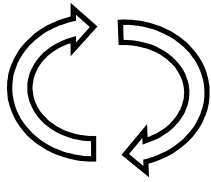
The disadvantage of purely bidding or purchase based model is the added overhead. Having the entire turn order system rely on bidding is not advised.

Also, bidding is very abstract. Players may lose sight on what these tokens and resources represent in a combat situation. Too many token systems runs a risk of meta-systems entering the gaming table.

However, modifying and disrupting the turn order occasionally with resource (or skill) based changes may provide added tactical depth.



Normally, turn order would alternate between opposing groups



By spending x resource, second PC is able to take her action outside the normal cycle.

Engagement-pull system

Engagement-pull system attempts to model the action-reaction between two participants without breaking the turn system fundament.

In short, if a character engages with another character, the next in turn is that engaged character.

This system essentially uses a traditional turn order system with a twist that an engaged character is “pulled” in the order next.

The advantage is in a combat situation in which a character charges another in melee and after resolving the attack, the focus is kept on these two characters fighting and the defender is next in turn.

A fighter engages with the enemy and attacks

#1



#2

The targeted enemy is next in turn regardless of the initiative of other characters



Shared turns

Shared turns considers two (or more) characters having their action happen simultaneously as if they shared the turn.

The characters that have direct interaction are best ones to be paired. The prime example is two characters fighting.

At minimum, characters sharing a turn can both attempt an action regardless of the other characters action. It means that if the attack would kill the other character, this character is considered to attack back due to simultaneous nature of their turn.

In a more detailed combat system, the co-dependent nature of two characters actions may be modelled in detail as well. You attack high, I attack low, that means...

Personally, I would use this as an extension of engagement-pull model allowing the targeted character to act as if it happened in a simultaneous clash.

Two fighters are engaged in melee, exchanging blows

#1

They take their turn as a shared turn as long as they remain engaged



Both characters can perform attack/defense actions as provided by the game system

Wait and interrupt

If going in turns creates unrealistic scenarios in which it appears that characters are not reacting in real time to activities around them, being able to interrupt turns can solve that.

A character may choose to skip his turn and wait for others to take their action first. This allows the character to interrupt a turn and perform an activity in response.

Interrupts may be granted for other reasons also like a traditional “attack of opportunity”.

Whether the interrupted character can continue his turn or not can depend on the success of interruption. This enhances the dependent relationship between the characters and their actions.

Another option is to choose to run away when being charged by the enemy. Running away does not happen ‘after’ the enemy has charged you but as a reaction to enemy charging at you. In game mechanic terms, ‘run away interrupt’ is always available if there is distance between characters regardless of action economy.

WAIT

PC ranger is first in turn... she wants to wait what the wizard is up to

(#1) → #2.5



The NPC wizard attempts to attack...

#2



INTERRUPT

.. But the ranger interrupts his turn when she spots the wizard's action

Sub-group turn order

Sub-groups refer to a group of characters which are grouped by their type, location or other parameter.

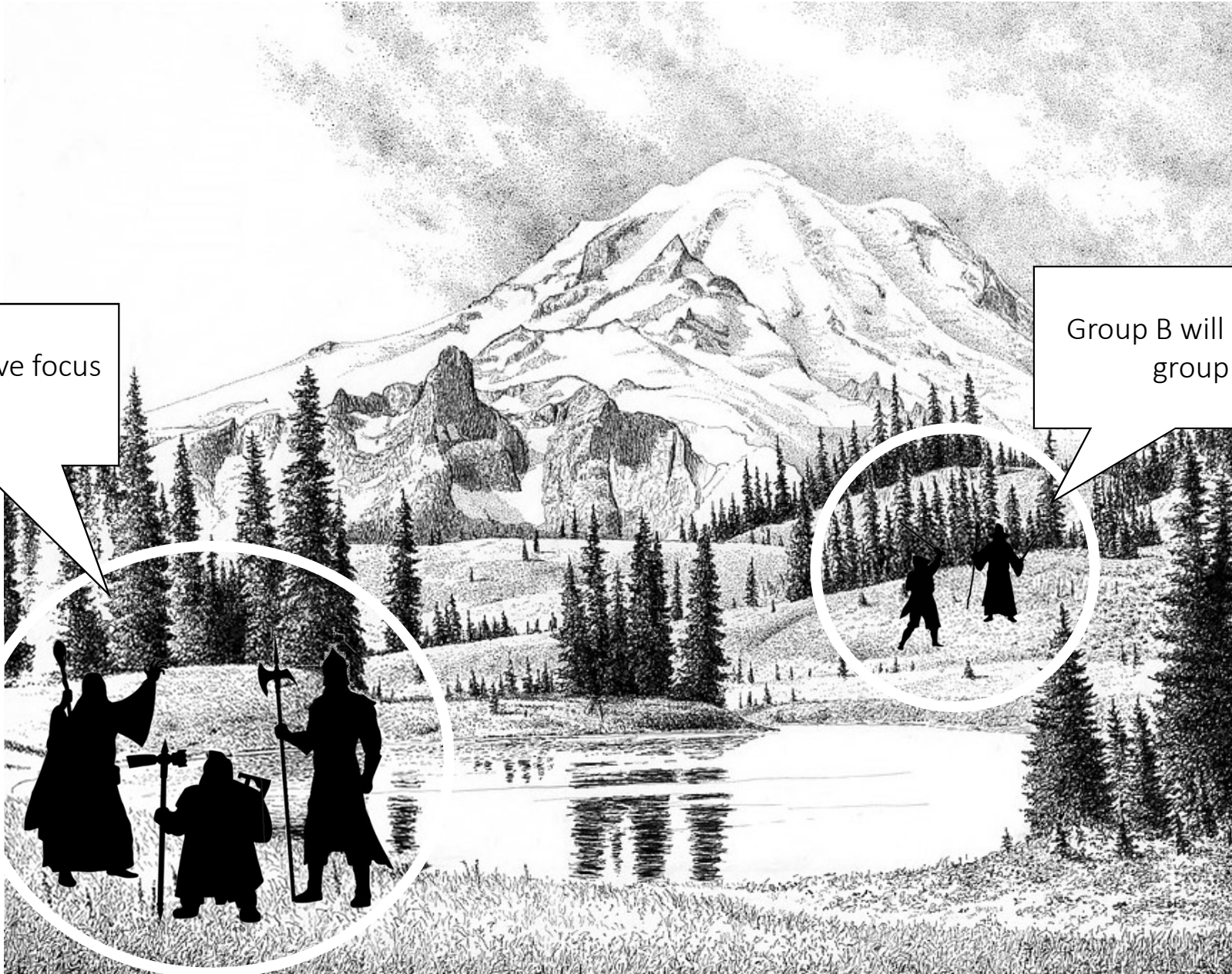
A sub-group in turn has all its characters act, individually or as a group, before moving the initiative to the next group.

Most commonly a group of minions acts as if they were a single unit.

Alternatively, all characters in location A act before characters in location B can act. This puts the focus of events into a single location. The locations are likely not directly connected with distance between them or other seal that prevents interaction between the locations.

Third option is that a single type of characters act first (like PCs always go first) and then another type or the rest of characters. This can be used for special situation in which a certain group is given priority over the others.

Within a single sub-group there can be a separate turn order system applied for individual characters.



Group A will have focus first

Group B will act after group A

Boss monster fight

Fighting a single large monster suffers from action economy imbalance if played in a single turn order.

Adopting a different turn order model in boss fights is eligible choice. This may be considered as a special trait of the enemy if you would frown upon using different turn order systems. It further enhances the nature of the enemy being capable of fighting against a group of player characters.

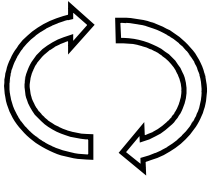
Essentially it is a round-robin model between the PC party and the enemy. After each PC turn the enemy takes its turn.

This balances action economy 1:1 and makes the boss monster appear very intimidating and deadly. Think it like it would be mirrored number of times of PCs in its offensive capability.

The technique can be used in reverse if a PC would fight multiple small enemies.

Boss monster

#2, #4, #6



PC group



#1

#3

#5



Variable and combined turn order systems

It is possible to use different turn systems in different encounter types, even within a single encounter. However, the challenge is the added complexity and players needing to remember how the current encounter is being run.

However, if wandering outside the core turn mechanism is done sparingly and a lot of highlight is put to emphasize how the encounter at hand works differently, this could be considered. That has been essentially my recommendation throughout this document.

Nailing down what drives the turn order in the first place should remain immutable. Then if the actual turn order values are modified and special rulings are applied like giving a fast lane to a character, these don't challenge that core mechanic of one character at a time.

If in doubt, have players take control of the initiative system more and drive it than being exposed to it and subjected to its quirks. If players make decisions that now I do this and you do that they won't notice to complain when a big boss monster is giving them a challenge of their lives.

Bad turns suck

Losing a turn sucks. In a fight of ten characters, when the PC is in turn and he misses, having to wait possibly nine other characters to try again can easily be five, ten or even twenty minutes later.

If the initiative system supports it, a player character who had a bad turn could be given a slight advantageous modifier when determining his next turn.

A queue based model would not place that character end of the queue.

With a resource purchase model he could buy another action.

Or maybe he will have at the end of round another action with possibly increased difficulty modifier or other penalty / cost.

In any case, be mindful of the 'quality of the turn' for players.

Final words

I tinker and playtest different mechanisms and their combinations continuously to find the ones that best model various situations in role-playing settings. The mechanisms are relatively system-specific but most systems are quite flexible on house ruling how turn order works for example. There are not many special rules, skills or items that impact the turn order or they are simple modifiers of the core mechanic like initiative value modifiers.

If you are looking to house rule your game, in my experience, turn order system is the easiest to play around with and it has huge implications on how the game runs and feels.

Remember, you can always go back to the original. I've done it also.

