

Unearthed Arcana: Three-Pillar Experience

Back when we were designing fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons, we talked about the game's three pillars: exploration, social interaction, and combat. By thinking about social interaction and exploration as foundational aspects of D&D, we made sure we were always looking beyond combat when designing the game. Fighting easily draws the most attention in terms of rules and game balance, but the other two elements are just as important in making each game session exciting and unique.

This article presents an alternative way to award experience points (XP) by focusing on the three pillars. It also seeks to simplify XP tracking by incorporating elements inspired by the milestone system of awarding experience.

These variant rules use a different XP economy, in which the value of experience points is much different than it is in the standard game. Doing so allows for simpler math, with characters gaining one level for every 100 XP earned. Awards are all relative to a character's level, however, so the rate at which characters gain levels remains the same throughout the game (as compared to the default system, which has faster advancement in a few spots).

These rules use 100 XP as a baseline because doing so makes it easy to assess the benefit of an XP award. For example, earning 20 XP earns you 20 percent of a level, and so on. For DMs and players, the intent is to make it much easier to understand the risks and rewards in an adventure.

One thing to keep in mind is that the advancement rate of these rules is different from that presented in the core game. However, that change is balanced out by giving the DM more control over progression.

Gaining Levels

Under this system, you gain a level each time you accumulate 100 XP. When you cross that

This Is Playtest Material

The material here is presented for playtesting and to spark your imagination. These game mechanics are in draft form, usable in your campaign but not refined by final game development and editing. They aren't officially part of the game and aren't permitted in D&D Adventurers League events.

If we decide to make this material official, it will be refined based on your feedback, and then it will appear in a D&D book.

threshold and increase your character's level, you reduce your current XP total by 100.

Dividing XP

Under this system, XP is not usually divided among party members. The award for an adventure is the same for all members of the party. If defeating a monster awards 10 XP, each member of the party gains 10 XP.

If the party is exceptionally large, though, the notion of safety in numbers makes awards a little easier to earn. If there are more than six members of a party eligible to earn XP (counting both player characters and NPCs), halve all experience awards.

Earning Experience Points

You gain experience points through activities representing each of the three pillars of adventuring: exploration, social interaction, and combat. Each type of game play awards XP differently.

Exploration

You gain XP for recovering lost magic items, claiming hidden treasure caches, and exploring abandoned sites or places of power. Your character can gain experience points by retrieving a mighty weapon from a dragon's hoard, stealing a diamond from an evil baron, or uncovering the location of a lost temple of evil.

The value of a location or item compared to your level determines its XP value. Finding a treasure or exploring a location appropriate to your tier earns you 10 XP, plus an additional 10 XP for each tier above your current tier. You don't gain XP for exploration below your tier.

Items. Valuable treasures and magic items are assigned to tiers as follows:

Tier 1: A single item worth 100 gp or more, or a nonconsumable rare magic item

Tier 2: A single item worth 1,000 gp or more, or a nonconsumable very rare magic item

Tier 3: A single item worth 5,000 gp or more, or a nonconsumable legendary magic item

Tier 4: A single item worth 50,000 gp or more, or an artifact

Locations. Forgotten locations and sites of power aren't fitted to tiers by any hard and fast rule. Rather, a location's tier depends on its importance in your campaign. You can measure the discovery of a lost location, or the liberation of a place from the clutches of a villain or monster, by the scope of such an action's impact:

Tier 1: A location important to a small town or village

Tier 2: A location vital to a kingdom

Tier 3: A location important across a world

Tier 4: A location of cosmic importance

Social Interaction

You gain experience points for turning important NPCs into allies, aligning them with your cause or denying them as assets to your enemies.

When you do so, the XP you gain are based on an NPC's power and influence.

You gain 10 XP for swaying an NPC appropriate to your tier, plus an additional 10 XP for each tier above your current one. You gain 5 XP for affecting an NPC one tier below you, but you gain no XP for NPCs of a lower tier than that.

NPCs are assigned to tiers as follows:

Tier 1: An NPC with influence over a small town or village, or the equivalent

Tier 2: An NPC with influence over a city or the equivalent

Tier 3: An NPC with influence over a kingdom, a continent, or the equivalent

Tier 4: An NPC (including a deity) with cosmic significance or influence across multiple worlds

Combat

You gain XP for defeating monsters in combat, whether by slaying them or leaving them in a state in which they pose no threat. For example, you might force a demon back to the Abyss or imprison an undead horror in a sealed tomb.

The XP you gain for defeating a monster is determined by comparing the monster's challenge rating to your level. In most cases, you gain 5 XP per monster defeated. That award increases to 15 XP if a monster's challenge rating is twice your level or more. If its challenge rating is half your level or less, that award drops to 2 XP.

Focusing on Pillars

As a DM, if your campaign focuses on just one or two of the three pillars, you'll simply grant XP awards for those pillars. However, if you eliminate any pillars, you'll want to be sure to give the players plenty of opportunities to find success in challenges making use of the other pillars. Alternatively, you can consider increasing the XP awards for the pillars you do use.

Increasing the reward of the two remaining pillars by 50 percent is a good way to account for losing a single pillar. If you use only one pillar, consider tripling its rewards.