

Pitch

Action Hacked is another way to play 5e that connects the game mechanics directly to the story. Players make all the rolls. The DM judges the stakes. Each roll determines positive *and* negative outcomes. In a risky situation, if you roll close to your target, you gain something *and* you lose something.

Why play this way? Pack more action into each session! Emphasize story, imagination, and improvisation over the tactical wargame aspects of 5e. Combat is more cinematic and easier for the DM. Exploration and social encounters can have more crunch. All three “pillars” of the game can be mixed and matched more easily.

If you enjoy both 5e *and* [Powered by the Apocalypse](#) or [Forged in the Dark](#) games, or even if you're just curious about them, this hack is for you. Best of all, no conversion is needed, just use your existing 5e characters and books.

© 2023 James A. Overton. Licensed under [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0](#).
<https://actionhacked.com> Version 0.1.1

Design

This hack is designed to change the 5e resolution mechanics, with **no other changes** to rules, characters, spells, monsters, etc. The biggest inspiration is [Blades in the Dark](#). The key design elements are:

Action rolls combine character moves and opponents' response. Action rolls replace attack rolls and skill checks.

Opponent saves are flipped: roll the character's bonus (e.g. spell attack bonus) against 10 + the opponent's bonus (e.g. saving throw bonus).

Situations account for danger: safe, steady, risky, desperate, hopeless.

Flashforward/back to the fun stuff.

Counters streamline combat, increase tension, and make social and exploration encounters crunchy.

Threats follow impulses, making opponents and obstacles more active.

This will work best if you're already quite familiar with 5e rules, and you try these new ideas with an open mind.

Try it for a session or two!

[And let us know how it went!](#)

Advice

Imagine the scene. Whether you use theatre of the mind or miniatures or a virtual tabletop, the fiction comes first. Close your eyes and imagine the scene.

Rich situations. Think of whole actions, not bonus actions and six-second rounds. Your character acts, your opponents respond.

Built tension, keep momentum.

Prepare for a fast game, then *everyone* helps to keep it moving. Take breaks!

Don't plan! Prepare, then let the story lead you. Flashforward to the action. Flashback to fill any important gaps.

Use all three pillars to support your scenes: combat, exploration, social.

Estimate! Don't calculate. Don't count squares. Use round numbers. Close enough is good enough, and much better than slowing the game down.

Consistent but flexible. A good story has a core logic, but it ebbs and flows.

No rulebooks at the table. Trust each other. Let the DM make a ruling in the moment. If it's really important, look it up later, and remember it next time.

Players

Pursue your goals. When your character takes action, say what they're trying to achieve. This helps the DM determine if any challenges stand in the way.

Perform heroic actions. Face the challenge with heroic action. Say what your character does, what skill or ability they're using, and any details, advantages, or roleplay. This helps the DM judge the stakes.

Get advantage at a cost by asking for a Dragon's Deal, and paying the price.

Help someone: give advantage to an ally but expose yourself to danger.

Work together: roll together to share the gain and the loss.

Protect someone: suffer their loss.

Flashback: Invent an action that your character did *in the past* to prepare for the present situation. If it was risky, make an action roll. The DM will charge you resources based on how complex or unlikely the flashback is. This could be 0-30% of your max HP, or spell slots, or ability uses, etc.

Together

Story comes first and last. The DM interprets the fiction to judge the stakes. The player can agree or revise. Whatever the result of the action roll, the outcome advances the story.

Action rolls resolve challenges. One roll determines the character's success *and* their opponents' response. Most action rolls result in *both* gain and loss.

Only players roll. For an opponent's save or ability check, the player rolls the character's relevant bonus against 10 + the monster's bonus.

Take turns. There's no initiative order, but share the spotlight.

One action per turn. Your actions should be combined into only one roll.

Rolls are required when there's a risk of a negative consequence.

Actions, big and small: An action roll represents a whole situation, not just one swing of the sword. Scale up or down to suit the moment in the story. Treat a group of enemies as a single threat, with combined HP and damage.

Make a saving throw when you face danger without an action roll.

Dungeon Master

Introduce a threat. When a character takes action, ask yourself if there's a challenge in the way. If there is, describe the scene and ask how they deal with it: "What do you do?" Let the players describe positive outcomes.

... or let them do it. The characters are competent. If there's no significant challenge or danger, they just do it. They can try for more, but the situation may become more risky.

... or make a safe roll if there's no danger, but want to let the dice decide.

Dragon's Deals tempt players with better odds but always have a cost. Use them to introduce new twists, complications, surprises, and threats.

Greater reward: Offer a player greater best case for the action if they risk a worse worst case – or vice versa.

Bump the counters as the outcome of an action, or whenever it makes sense.

Flashforward: Jump to the action with a **situation roll**. Ask a player to roll d20 + initiative or an ability bonus against a target (e.g. 12), to determine a new starting **situation** (usually risky).

Take Action

When your character takes action, state their intent, the ability they're using, and any details, advantages, or roleplay. The DM judges the **stakes**: the **situation**, the **target** number, the **best case**, and the **worse case**. You can accept, or revise and ask again.

Roll 1d20 (maybe with advantage or disadvantage) plus your relevant ability bonus. Your result may **shift** the **outcome** up or down 1 or 2 steps. The DM may choose the **option** for your outcome, or may let you choose.

Judge the Stakes

By default, the situation is risky, the target is 15, the best case outcome is one gain (a step up), the worst case is one loss (a step down). Consider these factors, then **go with your gut**.

Tier raw power, relative level/hit dice

Scale quantity, physical size, timescale

Potency special vulnerabilities or resiliences, surprise or preparation

Quality equipment that is scrounged, improvised, decent, well-made, masterwork, specialized, ill-suited

Situation	Roll		Result	Outcome	Option
				4 gain	
safe	Natural 20	Triumph		3 gain	4 gain & 1 loss
steady	> Target + 5	Best Case		2 gain	3 gain & 1 loss
risky	Target ± 5	Between		gain & loss	withdraw
desperate	< Target - 5	Worst Case		loss	1 gain & 2 loss
hopeless	Natural 1	Disaster		2 loss	1 gain & 3 loss
				3 loss	1 gain & 4 loss
				4 loss	

Reap the Reward, Pay the Price

You or an ally gain or lose hit points, ground, footing, balance, hold, grip, item, time, concentration, an opening, sight, insight, secret, momentum, focus, hope, faith, ... **Bump a counter!**

Gains and losses can be big or small.

Multiples of gain or loss can be **multiple smaller** gains or losses. That's usually more interesting!

A gain can be inflicting **average damage** for the character's attack.

A loss can be one or more opponents inflicting their **average damage**.

If the opponent has a very good or very bad chance to hit the character, then adjust the situation or the loss.

Estimate, don't calculate!

Challenges

Counters represent challenges, threats, and obstacles by tracking outcomes. A counter has a threshold, and when it fills something happens. Name them *what* happens, never for *how* it happens – events not methods!

Counters focus attention, create tension, and set pace. The players should see them, but the DM may sometimes keep the threshold secret.

Counters can work in series or parallel. They can count up or down. They can have broad or narrow scope. They can be filled by action roll outcomes, or what makes sense in the story. One or more players can contribute. Counters can be temporary or persistent.

Gain and loss counters count outcomes in small numbers of gain and loss points. These are good for social and exploration encounters.

Damage counters count total hit points of damage inflicted on an opponent or a group, and are good for combat. Split the counter into multiple parts. When each fills, the opponents grow weaker or change behaviour, like a boss fight in a video game.

Examples

Combat

- guards investigate
- enemy is routed
- enemy counterattacks
- reinforcements arrive
- dragon's fire / lair action

Exploration

- door/chest is opened
- trap is triggered / trap is disarmed
- you catch them / they catch you
- get past security
- traverse the wilderness
- scale the castle wall

Social and Downtime

- change someone's mind
- negotiate a truce
- gain their trust
- your trick is discovered
- discover a new spell
- create a magic item

Combinations

- bloodied > routed > slaughtered
- defeat champion + defeat minions
- break-in vs. alert guards
- open chest | parley | defeat guards

Advice

Let players lower counters if they work to prevent that thing from happening.

Danger counters trigger an alert, a trap, reinforcements, etc. When the characters are not safe, have a danger counter running. When it fills, the characters make saving throws.

If you need to make a “saving throw” against an opponent's melee or ranged attack, use the approach from Knave. Calculate your **armor save** bonus as your AC - 10. Then roll d20 plus this bonus against 10 + the opponent's attack bonus. This “flips” the roll.

Use multiple counters for complex challenges. When one fills, something changes. Allow for varied approaches.

Scale clocks for party size. In a risky situation, expect about 1 gain and 1 loss per character per turn. Safer situations make gains much more rapid.

Fine-grained counters can add detail to social and exploration scenes by treating gains more like hit points. Give characters a base “damage” plus proficiency bonus for their “rapier wit” or their “piercing intellect”.

Impulses

Another key to fiction-first play is to make the threats and obstacles active. Give them simple impulses, follow them, then find out what happens.

Warlords: An *alpha wolf* dominates; a *collector* possesses; a *dictator* controls; a *general* disciplines; a *hive queen* swarms; a *prophet* denounces.

Creatures: a *stalker* plays before killing; a *guardian* protects the pack/herd/brood; an *ambusher* entraps; a *devourer* feeds; a *builder* constructs; a *breeder* spawns.

Clans: a *cult* victimizes; a *family* protects its own; a *pack* hunts; a *mob* riots; *sybarites* consume.

Terrain: *broken ground* breaks; an *exposed place* exposes; a *precipice* pushes over; *shifting ground* disorients; a *torrent* sweeps away; a *wall* impedes.

Landscapes: a *breeding pit* teems; a *fortress* defends; a *furnace* burns; a *maze* traps; a *mirage* entices; a *prison* contains.

Action Roll Glossary

action The character's activity in the fiction that must be resolved by a roll.

stakes The interpretation of the action within the fiction as game mechanics: situation, target, best and worst case.

situation The fictional position of the character in terms of safety/danger.

target The number to roll on a d20 for a between result. For attacks, it's the AC. For skills it's the DC. For opponent saves, it's 10 + their save bonus.

best case Outcome if you roll greater than target + 5. Natural 20 adds to this.

worse case Outcome if you roll greater than target + 5. Natural 1 adds to this.

gain Unit of positive action outcome.

loss Unit of negative action outcome.

outcome Combination of gain and loss.

outcome option An alternative to the outcome that the DM may choose.

action roll The d20 result, with bonuses applied, compared to the target. The roll will fall into one of five categories, and determine whether the best case, worst case, something in between, or something extra happens.

Counter Glossary

counter A numeric representation of a complex challenge, obstacle, or threat in terms of accumulated outcomes.

bump Increment or decrement a counter by one or a few points.

threshold The maximum number of points for a given counter.

fill Surpass the counter's threshold, which triggers some event.

gain-and-loss counter Uses coarse gain and loss points.

fine-grained counter Uses fine-grained points or some sort.

damage counter Uses hit points of damage inflicted. Count up!

danger counter Tracks an impending danger, usually with loss points.

armor save A roll that a player makes when they are attacked, but not taking action. Often triggered by a counter. Calculate your armor save modifier as AC - 10. Roll against 10 + opponent's attack modifier. This "flips" the roll, so players can roll for opponent attacks. The DM decides whether a successful save means half damage or no damage.

Situation roll

DM: Whoever has the best initiative bonus can roll against target 12.

R: I roll a 10 plus 3, so 13: *between*.

DM: Ok, the starting situation is *risky*.

Introduce a threat

DM: An animated skeleton clad in rusted chainmail shambles toward you, wielding a jagged shortsword.

Perform heroic actions

F: I draw my longsword and rush forward. I won't let it get past me.

Judge the Stakes

DM: What's the average damage for your longsword?

F: $1d8+3$ means $4.5+3$, so 7 damage.

DM: The situation is risky. The AC is 13. Best case is you do your 7 damage.

Worst case, you're hit for 4 damage.

The roll is *between*

F: I rolled a 10 plus 5, so 15.

DM: That's *between*, so inflict damage and take damage. What happens?

F: I battle with the skeleton, trading blow for blow. I'll mark off 4 HP.

The DM marks 7 damage on a counter.

... or best case

F: I rolled a 18 plus 5, so 23. I advance with confidence, knocking its sword aside and countering with strong slashes to its shoulders and arms.

... or worst case

F: I roll 3 plus 5 so 8.

DM: The skeleton gets its blade past your guard. You take 4 damage.

... or disaster

F: Damn it! Natural 1.

DM: The skeleton moves faster than you expect. You take 4 damage and it knocks you prone.

... or triumph!

F: Yeah! Natural 20!

DM: Awesome! What happens when you destroy it?

F: I shatter its arm with my first blow, then decapitate it with a backswing. The bones fall clattering to the ground.

... with the outcome option

F: I charge recklessly into battle.

DM: Ok! The situation is risky, AC 13. Best case you destroy it with this action. You're going to take 4 damage, and worst case is that's doubled.

Cast an attack spell

DM: The skeleton rushes at you.

W: I cast Firebolt. Flames fly toward it.

DM: Ok, that's risky with AC 13. The best case is average damage of your spell, and worst case you're hit for 5.

Cast a saving throw spell

W: I cast Toll the Dead on the skeleton.

DM: Ok, the skeleton's Wisdom save bonus is -1, so your target is a 9.

W: I roll 10, plus my spell attack bonus is 5, so 15. A ghostly bell tolls and the skeleton staggers in a cloud of dust.

Cast a “no roll” spell in combat

W: I cast Invisibility on myself.

DM: Ok, but the skeleton is right in your face! Roll an armor save. Its attack bonus is +4, so DC 14, 5 damage.

Cast an area-of-effect spell

W: I cast Fireball!

DM: Your situation is steady, DC 12. All the bugbears in the area of effect take half the average damage. Best case is that two thirds of them fail their saves and take full damage. Worst case one third take full damage, and they single you out for ranged fire, 10 damage.

Steady situation

R: I sneak attack the skeleton.

DM: It doesn't see you, so your situation is steady. AC 13. You'll do your average sneak attack damage, best case double. Worst case, take 5.

... the “withdraw” outcome option

DM: You rolled low. It suddenly steps out of reach, but it doesn't notice you.

Safe situation

DM: The skeleton is paralyzed by the spell, and at your mercy. Your situation is safe, AC 13, best case is an instant kill, worst is just damage.

Desperate situation

DM: The three skeletons have you surrounded. Your situation is desperate, AC 13. You'll take 7, maybe double. Best case you also do damage.

Hopeless situation

DM: Your wooden staff is no match for the dragon's thick scales. Your situation is hopeless, AC 18, best case you take 10 damage, worst case 30..

Dragon's Deal

DM: You can have advantage on your roll if I bump “breath weapon” counter.

Help someone

F: Don't take that deal! I'll help her by drawing it my way, exposing its belly.

DM: Ok. The wizard can have advantage, but you're both targets.

Work together

DM: Everyone roll stealth against 15 and we'll take the median result.

Protect someone

F: I cover the wizard with my shield.

DM: Ok, but you have to strain, and the blow numbs your arm. You take 5 damage, but the wizard is unharmed.

Alert counter

F: Damn it! Natural 1.

DM: In a risky situation a poor result means 2 loss. One loss is 5 damage from the skeleton's sword. The other loss is a bump on the alert counter, and now it's filled! The clang of sword on shield echoes through the dungeon, and draws the attention of ...

Fine-grained counter

DM: You get right up in the guard's face, and the outcome is 1 gain. I'll give you 3 plus your Intimidate skill bonus on the new “intimidate guard” counter.

Response counter

DM: The horde of orcs counterattacks, rushing forward in a wave of spears.

Everyone make an armor save – 12 damage if you fail, half if you succeed.

Multiple gains

DM: 3 gain, wow! Two of those will count for double damage. The third will be gaining an opening: you see a clear escape path through the horde.

Gain upper hand

DM: One of those gains will be gaining the upper hand, so your situation is safer for your next roll.

Gain insight

DM: One of those gains will be an insight. You see fear in the gladiator's eyes when he spots the statue, and you realize he's afraid of snakes.

Lose item

DM: One of those losses will be an item: the gladiator disarms you.

Large-scale counter

DM: The mansion has a high wall and regular patrols, including some magic users. You need 4 gain to break in. What do you do?

Why? My friends want to play 5e. I like the flavor, but the mechanics keep getting in the way of the story. I can't be the only one, so I thought I'd share this alternative I developed.

Why change Blades' terminology? I assume the reader knows 5e, not Blades. Sometimes Blades' terms don't suit 5e, or conflict, or aren't very clear.

Why not Blades' actions and d6 pools? I want to put the fiction first, but otherwise change as little as possible

Why change Blades' positions? I don't think these are too much different: 'controlled' becomes 'steady'; 'safe' is a fortune roll; 'hopeless' is like the opposite of a fortune roll.

Why change Blades' effects? Effect points are the core currency of Blades, but 5e has many varied resources to count, such as HP. Blades' default risky standard position is 2 effect and 2 consequence, which I scaled to 1 gain and 1 loss. Each gain or loss can count for some number of other resources, or a change in the fiction.

Why change Blades' clocks? To allow counting damage and other resources, and sometimes hide the threshold.

Why not add Blades' stress? I don't want yet another resource to track.

Why not Blades' crews/factions? Great idea! You should make that!

There isn't much Blades left! Not a question, but fair enough.

There's too much Blades! Ok, just play 5e, or use these rules for an occasional exploration or social encounter.

What about bonus actions? Either it's something you can just do, or you find a way to make one combined action.

What about reactions? Not sure. Try to run these like 5e, and let me know if you have problems.

What about AoE save-for-half effects? Based on the outcome, say that some portion of the targets fail their saves.

What about other editions? 2e, 3e, One and similar games should work.

Recommendations

[Band of Blades](#) by Stras Acimovic and John LeBoeuf-Little

[Wicked Ones](#) by Ben Nielson and Victor Costa

[The Lazy Dungeon Master](#) by Michael E. Shea

Acknowledgements

All the many creators of the world's most famous role-playing game.

[Blades in the Dark](#) by John Harper

[Knave](#) by Ben Milton

[Apocalypse World](#) by Vincent and Meguey Baker

Thanks

Lily, Andrew, Judy, Eric, Steve, Reuben, [TorontoDnD](#)