

Johnn Four's 30 Minute Panic Attack

"What do you do if you only have half an hour to prepare for a session?"

- **Pick A Setting**
- **Create Two Villains**
- **Figure Out Encounter Inventory**
 - 4 hour session? 4 combats, 4 roleplaying encounters, 1 dungeon
- **Create Encounter One-Liners**
 - Villain #1
 - Villain #2
 - Pair or link encounters
- **Add More Details**
 - Sort out the stats
 - Always pick a leader for groups
 - Always create 'love triangles'
 - Beginning, Middle, End
 - Make gossip/rumours/hooks
- **5 Room Dungeon**
 - Entrance/Guardian
 - Puzzle/Roleplaying Challenge
 - Trick/Setback
 - Climax/Battle/Conflict
 - Reward/Plot Twist
- **Iterate**
 - Flesh out the details until you run out of time
 - Start with stuff that causes the most problems
- **Wrap Up**
 - Plan just what you need
 - Remember who's attending

Pick A Setting

If the game does not already have a place, I make the setting a small village. Villages in the wilderness reduce the amount of world details needed and questions players might have. For example, if you put the PCs in a city, they will want to know the names of businesses, districts, streets, and more. In a village, there's a dozen buildings, no districts, no street names. Simplicity rules the day and makes my life easier.

I could throw the PCs naked in a dungeon and be done with it but I like NPCs as supporting cast. A village lets me introduce all kinds of NPCs – locals and strangers. So all options remain open here.

Finally, I don't know what kind of adventure the players want. In a village I can offer roleplay, nearby dungeons, and wilderness. Plus, the village usually becomes the default home base, giving some stability and recurring people and places to make life easier during the game.

Create Two Villains

The party needs a focus. An easy focus is an enemy doing something bad the PCs need to stop. I'd create two villains.

With two villains, I get an instant dynamic. There's enough complexity to get the players scratching their heads and thinking, while two is simple enough to GM without much prep. Also, the villains can oppose each other and sometimes help each other, while the PCs get caught in the middle.

- Give Villain #1 a goal. Let's say he's the Baron's son who's in love with the tavern waitress, but she thinks he's a cruel jerk, which he is.
- Give Villain #2 a different goal. Let's say it's an evil dragon getting tormented by knights on a crusade.
- Next, create the cord – tie the villains together. Just a single, tentative strand is enough for

now. Gameplay will strengthen the cord if by no other means than the PCs' presence.

Let's say the Baron has hired the knights to kill the dragon because the lizard is killing his villagers and destroying crops. That ties the dragon indirectly to the Baron's son.

Before I leave this step, I start thinking of a twist. Just let it run in the back of your mind as you plan and game. A twist idea might never appear, that's OK. But if a twist does come to mind, then you've got a cool story angle ready.

Figure Out Encounter Inventory

In your games right now, note how long on average it takes to run a combat, a roleplaying encounter, and a 5 Room Dungeon or small dungeon.

For us, combats take about 30 minutes, roleplaying encounters take 10, and small dungeons take a couple hours.

With 30 minutes to prep, I'd estimate session length. Say, 5 hours.

Then I'd create a bullet list of encounter types I'd like to see. Say, 6 combats, 6 roleplaying encounters, a small dungeon. That's 3 hours (6 x 30 mins) + 1 hour (6 x 10 minutes) + 2 hours for the dungeon. A total of 6 hours.

Wait, that's too much. My budget is 5 hours. And gameplay always offers more encounters than you plan for. So, let's tweak our encounters to 4 combats, 4 roleplaying encounters, 1 dungeon. 2 hours + 40 minutes + 2 hours. That's still too many, but it at least gives us a framework.

Now that I know my encounter types and quantity, I make that bullet list:

- Roleplay:
- Roleplay:
- Roleplay:
- Roleplay:
- Combat:
- Combat:
- Combat:
- Combat:
- Dungeon:

Inventory is ready for details.

Create Encounter One-Liners

Now I take my encounter inventory and write a one-line hook for each.

I already have my place: a village. That helps a lot. It gives me an idea of the general area and possibilities.

So now I mine any details I've come up with for hooks. That will fill in some encounters right away, leaving me with just a few others to figure out.

The first thing we do is make a one-line encounter for each villain:

- Dragon
- Baron's son

Our story also contains three other characters so far. Let's use them all:

- Tavern waitress
- Baron
- Knights on crusade bugging dragon

Now let's consider the dungeon. It strikes me there's an obvious one here: the dragon's lair.

But wait. I just had a funny thought. What if the dragon was in the Baron's keep and the Baron didn't know it? How could that be possible? Well, let's say underneath the keep are caverns, and the exit the dragon uses is a few hundred yards down a tunnel into the forest.

Great, the dungeon has a location. Pieces are starting to fall into place.

Even if no clever ideas are coming to you at this point, you've still got your encounter list. Players will likely hypothesize some good twists during the session. Steal one of those.

Meantime, we always want to introduce the conflicts to the PCs as soon as possible. I prefer to do this directly in encounters.

Villain #1

Conflict #1 is the Baron's son harassing the waitress. That sounds like a great roleplay encounter. And a great way to kick off the session.

But what if the PCs attack? OK, let's give the jerk a few henchmen. The Baron's son will try to flee. If the PCs capture him, what then?

Well, what has the party got, really? A guy with bad manners. Not much else. So I'm not going to spend any time on this possibility.

What if the PCs kill the jerk? Well now, that's an interesting development. Hmmm. I'd say we escalate to the Baron. He'll have feelings on the matter. He's also paying a band of knights. Even if that serendipitous option wasn't available, I'd give the Baron some guards who would become Spotlight NPCs now, chasing after the PCs and bringing them to justice.

OK, I've got my opener. It introduces a villain and his conflict. And I've thought of a couple predictable contingencies where murder hobo PCs are concerned.

Hey, I just thought of another idea. What if the waitress falls in love with a PC? Or the knight leader? Interesting! I'll keep that in my back pocket for now.

Villain #2

For villain #2, I also want to introduce that conflict right away through an encounter. I could have the dragon attack the PCs. Or have a parley. But instead, I want to keep that confrontation for later, to build up the drama.

So I need to introduce the conflict of the dragon doing evil things to the village another way.

When you can't confront something directly, you introduce evidence. So, what evidence would there be of the dragon's evil activities? Let's turn that into an encounter.

Perhaps the PCs see a burning farm. A farmer carries an injured boy, screams for help. He'll tell the PCs all about the dragon attack on his farm, and how his wife died from acid breath, and his youngest son was hit too but needs a healer's attention.

This sounds like a good roleplaying type encounter. Plus, the farmer can answer the party's inevitable questions about the area, who's in charge, what's been happening lately, and where can you get a good ale around here.

Paired Encounters

Another great thing we can do is have paired encounters. Number one is a roleplaying encounter. Then time passes. Then number two is

a combat encounter with the same NPC. This re-uses your NPCs efficiently. It also builds tasty stories. The sequence generates build-up, anticipation, and familiarity. It creates the feeling of depth and immersion when all you've done is arrange a paired sequence.

Let's anticipate a roleplaying encounter with the Baron's son and then a combat with him and his henchmen. Also, let's do the same for the knights.

At the least, this gives the party tactical information ahead of time so they can invest session time planning and thinking, if they want. In my games, this often creates great intra-party roleplaying "encounters."

Here's our encounter inventory fleshed out a bit (note, the order does not matter right now, we just want encounter ideas and enough ideas to fill a session):

- Roleplay: Farmer attacked by dragon, son needs healing, farmer tells of dragon
- Roleplay: Baron's son harasses waitress with henchmen egging him on
- Roleplay: Knights
- Roleplay:
- Combat: Knights
- Combat: Baron's son
- Combat:
- Combat:
- Dungeon: Dragon's lair

Our inventory is filling up!

Adding More Details

We've got Villain #1 – the Baron's son – doing bad things to Victim #1. But the PCs have not yet interacted much with Victim #1, they've just intervened or not. So, let's create a private roleplaying encounter with the waitress. She can fill the PCs on backstory about the Baron's son and any other details we might want, such as another plot hook.

Keeping things simple and our core self-generating gameplay, let's have the waitress have another problem, apart from unwanted overtures, and she'll ask the PCs for help.

Villages have trails or roads leading to them. Using my free ebook for RPT subscribers, [1,372 Roadside Encounter Ideas](#), I randomly pick one idea:

#113 On a bridge, the PCs hear the roar of water much louder than the river they cross. Then the

river level drops. Sounds of combat upstream reach the PCs' ears. At the battle site, mercenaries are trying to capture a water elemental. The elemental is good aligned and will appeal to the party for help. The mercenaries, if aided, will not split their bounty from the wizard who hired them. The elemental, if rescued, will reward the party with random treasures from the river bottom, but the PCs acquire the enmity of the wizard who posted the bounty.

Now I need to connect this with the waitress. OK, instead of mercenaries, it's her older brother and a few other village youths.

Always Pick A Leader

Every group needs a leader. So when I read "mercenaries" I ask, who's the leader? And in this case, it's not mercenaries but a group of village boys. So I ask, who's the leader?

It could be the brother. But I like to stir the plot. So instead, the group is lead by the brother's best friend because I have an idea the best friend is in love with the waitress too, and that gives us a great motive for this situation.

Always Create Love Triangles

Back to our idea, we know the leader, now we ask Why? The idea gives us one answer: treasure. But that's shallow, pun intended. Here's a better idea: the leader wants to prove himself to the waitress. Anytime I see romance in a plot, I create a triangle. Now we've got our triangle:

Brother's Best Friend ⇔ *Waitress* ⇔ *Baron's Son*

Now, how do we hook the PCs? Well, the waitress wants to save her brother's life because the fool is off to fight a water elemental. Unless the PCs do something to lose her trust, they'll be the only people she can turn to because....

Hmmm, good question. Well, there's urgency. She could try to round up a bunch of locals, but the PCs are right there, armed, in a group. Let's go with that and adapt during the game if this does not prove apt.

Beginning, Middle, End

Every encounter has a beginning, middle, and end. When the PCs hear about the water elemental and treasure, the roleplaying encounter with the

waitress will likely end. So we don't want to introduce that right away, or our roleplaying encounter will be over in five seconds. We need a beginning and middle for a good few minutes of roleplaying.

Likely a PC will approach her after the encounter with the jerk. If not, she'll serve the PCs their drinks (on the house) and strike up a conversation. Let's give her some gossip to share and tease out during the encounter. If the players roleplay well, they get some juicy details.

Make Gossip

Gossip should always involve our existing cast of characters. Pick any two characters and create a true or false connection. For example, knight leader and Baron. What secret might they have? I write some ideas down, not caring about true/false right now. If stuck, use Tarot cards or a tool like Rory's Story Cubes or an online generator. Here's a few single word possibilities: lovers, robbery, bastard.

I pick two other characters. The Brother's Best Friend and the Farmer. More words: sheep, murder, feud.

However, the smart money's on the PCs asking about known major characters and taking a keen interest in them. I can't know who the PCs will have met in advance for the waitress to gossip about, so I just create three lines of three words to use *ad hoc* during the session:

- Gossip seeds #1: betrayal, fear of snakes, property deed
- Gossip seeds #2: rival, cheating, infection
- Gossip seeds #3: impotent, card game, ogre

Here's our updated encounter inventory:

- Roleplay: Farmer attacked by dragon, son needs healing, farmer tells of dragon
- Roleplay: Baron's son harasses waitress with henchmen egging him on
- Roleplay: Knights
- Roleplay: Waitress needs PCs to save brother from water elemental
- Combat: Knights
- Combat: Baron's son
- Combat: Water elemental vs. village boys
- Combat:
- Dungeon: Dragon's lair

Just one combat hook left to create. Let's just generate a random one. We can work out how to integrate it during gameplay. It's a floater game piece. I get "Giant Bee". Great. Done.

5 Room Dungeon

With just half an hour to get ready, I'll use the 5 Room Dungeon template to quickly make the dragon's lair:

- **Entrance/Guardian:** We know the entrance is a tunnel hidden in the forest. A sneaky dragon would arrange a dangerous beast to live nearby, one that would be no threat to the dragon but would be to nosy villagers. I grab my monster book and pick a critter.
- **Puzzle/Roleplaying Challenge:** The tunnel is trapped. The dragon knows what spots to avoid the pit trap and poisoned darts. Hey, let's throw in a giant stone rolling ball. The PCs can use the pit trap to escape injury.
- **Trick/Setback:** The dragon can seal the opening to his cavern. If the dragon is in when the PCs arrive, he can seal himself in his cave. If the dragon is out, he'll be coming back just around the time the PCs enter the cavern....
- **Climax/Battle/Conflict:** Dragon fight!
- **Reward/Plot Twist:** This one's easy. The twist is the lair is under the Baron's keep. I'll add a secret passage from the dragon's lair to the keep to make that fact discoverable. I'll also add a bit of long forgotten treasure here – some gold, a couple potions, and something wondrous, draped on the skeleton of the person trapped in the passage for reasons unknown (I'll roll randomly for treasure during the session).

Iterate

With all the major pieces in place, start fleshing out the details until you run out of time.

You might start with the stuff that gives you the most problems. For example, you might struggle with drawing maps on-the-fly. Or with NPC personalities. Or with combat.

Me? I'll start with the encounter that will trigger first. I'll make sure I feel confident about that. Great session starts make the rest of the night go

smoother for me. Also, the first encounter is the only encounter I control. After it triggers, the PCs choose what to do next. So time spent here will for sure be well-spent in-game. First encounters also set the hook, tone, and anticipation. They are like concierges. So if I get encounter #1 GM'd right, my other work is more likely to pay off.

Then I'd touch each encounter in my inventory. Flesh it out a bit. Generate NPCs, monsters, items as needed. Add a couple details to each encounter and move to the next.

I keep cycling through my encounter inventory, adding new details until time ran out.

Wrapping Up

This sounds like a bit of work and would not fit within 30 minutes. But that's because I've probably over-explained a few things.

- Start with setting. That's your snow globe for the adventure. Stay inside the glass.
- Then figure out how many encounters you'll likely need for the session.
- Then use encounter development to develop your plot at the same time.
- As you add more details, you spot more connections you can make to close loops and make things tighter. But these are just bonuses.

Here are a few more tips from me and other fine GMs.

Plan Just What You Need

In the perfect GMing world, you plan only what you need for next session. If you have extra time, great, flesh out the adventure, campaign, or game world a bit, or do some inspirational reading.

Depending on the directions your PCs can choose to go, planning specific encounters further in advance increases the risk of wasted time. Things change over time – NPCs, PCs, locations, plots, challenge levels, capabilities – and the older an unused encounter is, the greater the chance it'll need updating or need to be written off completely. Dungeon crawls and other fixed location-based encounters are an exception. Even then, you're better off planning the environment and content inventory, rather than specific situations, unless

each encounter is somehow firewalled from PC decisions and actions.

For example, the PCs could raise the alarm, in which case it would have been better planning who dwells in the dungeon and might respond, instead of planning the exact situation of every room in advance, many of which will now be empty or in an alert state.

“Plan just what you need” is an old tip from Dragon’s Dungeoncraft column, but it’s a good one.

Who’s Attending?

It’s important to know who’s showing up next game session when building encounters. I’ll often hook or hinge an encounter on one or more PCs or players, and if key players are absent, those encounters don’t live up to their potential. I’d rather spend more planning time on characters with attending players.

Knowing who’ll be at the game table helps me plan more efficiently, and ensures encounter planning time is spent to best in-game effect. If an encounter goes unused, I’ll go over it again before the next session it’s to be triggered, and add in stuff as needed for players not previously factored into the planning.

I rarely take planned elements out because of unexpected game table vacancies – the player just gets to hear about their character’s spotlight time and awesome moments from the others next session.

Determine Special Cases For Next Session

What are likely admin, accounting, shopping, treasure management, level-up, and other non-core adventure activities likely to occur next game?

How long, in your experience, will these administrivia things take? For example, if last session ended with finding a treasure horde, you know it’s going to take at least a quarter hour to examine, bicker, and divvy up the loot.

Use these types of situations to do a bit of bonus planning mid-game. It’s like free time for you to work on your own stuff while the players do their thing.

Another special case is the puzzle encounter. It might be an actual dungeon puzzle, or it could take the form of group discussion how to assault the bandit leader’s hideout.

Puzzle encounters give you free time to get extra planning and brainstorming done. You can also use in-game time to connect loose ends that just came up during play, to extend them into new encounters.

You should also have an idea whether you overestimate or underestimate encounter times. I tend to underestimate – encounters often take longer to play out than I anticipated – which I think is better than overestimating and getting caught unprepared.

The best way to find this out is to actually start timing your encounters. Keep a simple log in your notes:

- Bugbears: 17 mins
- Tavern chat: 6 mins
- Farmer’s cart: 32 mins

After the session, categorize the encounters:

- [Combat] Bugbears: 17 mins
- [RP] Tavern chat: 6 mins
- [RP] Farmer’s cart: 32 mins

Once you’ve got 30 or so encounters timed and categorized, go back and calculate averages. Now you’ve got a data-based assessment to use when you’ve only got half an hour to prep a session.