Martial Exploits for OSR and 5e

Minor Exploits

Characters may attempt all manner of minor exploits during combat, often but not always improvised to fit the situation at hand. A character might trip an opponent, push an enemy out of the way, disarm her, throw sand in his eyes, or swing from a chandelier to launch an assault. Minor exploits are generally limited, transient effects that occur as part of the character's attack action; the GM has the final say on whether a proposed exploit is possible and the effect.

For the minor exploit to occur, typically the character must first hit and cause damage as normal (or possibly this might occur after the exploit, as in the chandelier example above). The GM then makes an appropriate ruling to resolve the exploit. Some examples might include:

- An opposed strength check to knock on opponent off his feet, or throw him through a window.
- An opposed dexterity check to throw sand in someone's eyes, temporarily blinding them.
- A dexterity check to swing from a chandelier to drop into the fray behind an enemy.
- An opposed dexterity check (modified by level) to disarm.

Different GMs will of course make different rulings that suit their table; the above are examples only.

If the exploit is successful, the intended outcome occurs; the target is tripped, or thrown through the window, or temporarily blinded with sand, etc. The GM makes a ruling to determine the effect.

If the exploit is unsuccessful, the GM determines whether nothing happens or if there is any adverse effect. As a default option, there is a 50% chance the opponent may immediately attempt the same exploit against the character (at no action cost).

Example

While fighting some beastmen, a PC attempts to open a gash on his opponent's brow to blind him with his own blood. The player rolls a 16 to hit, and causes 3 hit points damage. The GM then calls for a opposed dex check to see if the wound is in the right location to cause a brow bleed. The roll succeeds, and the PC's sword opens a messy wound above the beastman's eyes, temporarily blinding him next round. If the exploit had been unsuccessful, nothing might have occurred, or the GM might have applied a 50% chance of the beastman spitting in the character's eyes, attempting to blind her instead!

Major Exploits

All player characters may attempt major exploits; truly impressive feats of strength and/or skill that inspire allies and turn the tide of battle. Feats of this kind sometimes find their way into local folklore, to be recounted by bards for years to come.

PCs may attempt major exploits against any target, but if the target is higher level, the attempt cannot be made until the target is less than half hit points. GMs will usually advise when this is so. Generally speaking, NPCs may only attempt major exploits if the target of the attack is equal to or lower level.

Major exploits cannot increase hit point damage or directly cause instant death, but are otherwise limited only by the player's imagination and the scenario at hand. A warrior might kick an enemy into a well, shatter his foe's weapon, impale him on a fence spike, cut off his hand, sever a harpy's wing, or slice off an aberrant terror's eyestalk. The GM has the final say on whether a proposed exploit is possible in the circumstances.

For the exploit to occur, the character must first hit and cause damage as normal. The attacker then makes a Luck check, modified at the GM's discretion. If the check is successful the exploit occurs and the character's Luck attribute is reduced by 1, as usual.

Example

Whilst fighting some giant scorpions, a PC attempts to sever one creature's poisonous stinger. The GM decides the action is fairly standard for a major exploit in his campaign, and does not impose any modifiers. The player rolls an 18 to hit, and causes 7 hit points damage. She then makes a Luck check… and succeeds! With a bloody spray, the scorpion's venomous barb spins off into the sand!

Rescue Exploits

At the GM's discretion, a character may be able to attempt a rescue exploit, which can only be used to protect another person or thing. Rescue exploits are only available when it is not the character's turn, in reaction to something happening within approximately 30 ft. A rescue might include such things as pushing another character out of harm's way, parrying a deadly blow aimed at a friend's skull, or grabbing hold of a henchmen before they plummet into a pit trap.

In order for a rescue exploit to occur, the rescuer must first make a successful dexterity check to move into position, react fast enough to intervene, etc. If the character moves out of melee, an engaged enemy gets a free attack as normal. Next, the rescuer must make a successful Luck check, modified at the GM's discretion. If the Luck check is successful, the rescue exploit occurs, and the rescuer's Luck attribute is reduced by 1, as usual.

Example

In the middle of a trying combat, an enemy sorcerer shoots a blast of deadly lightning at the party's distracted barbarian. The party thief declares a rescue, attempting to push his comrade out of harm's way. The GM agrees and calls for a dexterity check, which the thief successfully makes. The thief then makes a Luck check, rolling 1d20 and scoring a 4, well under his Luck attribute of 12. With a warning shout, the thief barrels into the barbarian, sending both sprawling out of the path of the sizzling blast!

Failed Exploits

If an exploit attempt fails, a character may not attempt another exploit against the same target until the circumstances significantly change in their favour (eg the target is reduced to below half hit points, or an ally comes to aid the PC in the melee, etc). A natural 20 on an exploit Luck check (ie a terrible failure) ordinarily results in a special setback, at the GM's discretion. For example, in the lightning example above, both the barbarian and the thief might have been caught in sorcerer's spell!