

About Sighting, Stealth and Perception for the Circe Road Campaign (5E)

November 30, 2024

The purpose of this document is to walk through the process that will be used for sighting and which party sees another, and at what range, in outdoor encounters (wilderness or civilized). The basic mechanism in the rules (2014 5th Edition) is that characters and monsters have a passive perception rating, which competes with the stealth skill roll of the party or monsters to be seen. Under most common conditions the party does not need to make perception rolls, and the DM makes stealth rolls for the monsters the party is trying to notice. My intent is to make this as streamlined as possible, while being as fair in the process as possible.

Maximum Sighting Distance and Direction:

The initial consideration is the distance at which sighting may occur. That depends on terrain and the size of the target, the character or monster to be seen. That is going to normally be a die roll, assuming the character or monster have not made a point of taking position at a vantage point allowing larger than usual sighting distances. The table below will be used for medium sized creatures:

	vs tiny	vs small	vs medium	vs large	vs huge
Plains terrain:	2d6 x 20'	3d6 x 20'	3d6 x 20'	4d6 x 20'	5d6 x 20'
Hills terrain*:	2d6 x 10'	3d6 x 10'	3d6 x 10'	4d6 x 10'	5d6 x 10'
Forest terrain:	2d6 x 5'	3d6 x 5'	3d6 x 5'	4d6 x 5'	5d6 x 5'

*: And low density wooded areas

(If the sighting creature is tiny, - a d6 in the roll. If huge, + a d6 to the roll.)

Choosing a vantage point may give longer sighting distances that will depend on circumstances. For example, being on a tower may give a distance multiplier of 30' or even 40'. Making a point of hiding in a gully or narrow canyon would decrease typical sighting distance, and that may vary with direction. Other modifications may be used for weather (storm or fog or moonlight or dark night).

So, in resolving perception and spotting, the first issue is what this maximum spotting distance is. This will be the maximum initial distance between the character or party and some monster or others who may be encountered.

Assuming the party is moving, the direction to the encountered monster or party will usually be resolved by the table below:

A d6 roll: 1: directly ahead; 2: ahead right; 3: to the right;
4: ahead/behind*; 5: to the left; 6: ahead left.

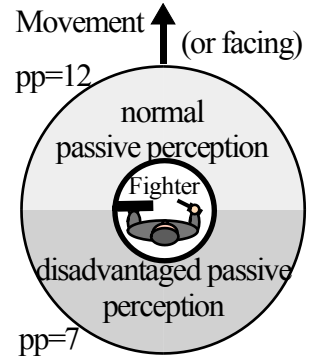
(On 4, roll again: high = behind IF the encountered monsters move faster than party.)

If the party is not moving, d8: 1=N, 2=NE, 3=E, 4=SE, 5=S, 6=SW, 7=W, 8=NW.
(the other party is necessarily moving.)

So, these rolls for distance and direction for the potential encounter are established. It remains to be seen whether either party sights (or detects, since sound can be a factor) the other. If either party is moving at a travel pace of "fast," it is automatically spotted at the distance rolled.

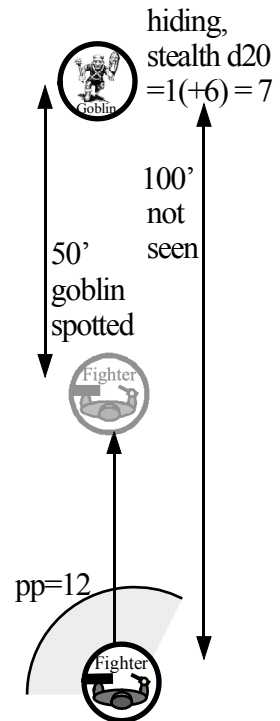
Basics: Single Character (moving) versus Hiding Single Monster:

The 5th Edition rules do not explicitly address facing. But in an outdoor situation, characters are most often moving and naturally facing, or looking, primarily in front of them. So, I'm using this as the assumption, based on the direction characters have been most recently moving unless a player declares actions to the contrary, such as "My character keeps looking behind him." (That might have a consequence for attention to threats from ahead.) So, the normal situation is that the backwards sector is treated as having "disadvantage" for spotting purposes, similar to being "distracted." This is shown at right.



In this figure we see a fighter who has Wisdom 10 (+0) and perception skill of +2, so he has passive perception forward of 12, and to the rear of 7. That 12 passive perception rating is compared to the stealth rating of the monster (or other target).

Suppose, for example, the target is a goblin hiding at a distance of 100' directly ahead. The Goblin data gives an explicit Stealth of +6. So, the DM makes a d20 roll for the goblin, getting d20=10. With the modifier, that is a 16. The fighter won't see the goblin at all, even if the range is close, 5' or so. The goblin is well hidden. Now, suppose the goblin rolls d20=1 for Stealth. That becomes a 7. The fighter's passive perception is 12, so the difference is 5. The fighter still does not see the goblin at 100', but will see him when his forward motion reduces the distance to 50'.



Since the goblin sees the fighter before the fighter sees the goblin (assumed), the goblin has a choice to make: Flee, Wait, or Attack. If the goblin chooses Flee or Attack, he takes a Surprise turn while the Fighter loses his first turn. If the goblin wins initiative, he has taken two turns of movement at 90' each (with dash and "nimble escape") and is most likely gone, now at 280' assuming plains terrain. The fighter could move 30' and check for sighting again (3d6 x 20') at 250', and might be able to get a shot off at the fleeing goblin.

If the goblin attacks, most likely he will shoot a bow from behind cover during the surprise round, and maybe another shot in the next round, if he gets initiative. He could then retreat 60' and have a chance of getting out of sight. Those shots would both be with disadvantage (above 80').

If the goblin waits and holds an action to shoot when the fighter gets to about 70', then the held action is triggered when the fighter gets to the given spot, giving the goblin a chance to hit without disadvantage within the surprise round, and possibly a second shot with an initiative win before the fighter can act.

Goblins waiting in ambush have good chances of achieving surprise. I use a table like this to see what a monster with some intelligence does, given a surprise opportunity like this:

Monster strength/numbers	Flee	Hide/Ambush	Attack
Weaker	1-3	4-5	6
About same	1-2	3-4	5-6
Stronger	-	1-2	3-6
Much stronger	-	1	2-6

Single Character (moving) versus Hiding Moving Monster:

Here we consider the case where there is a goblin encountered, but instead of hiding he is moving. At the moment of encounter, a die roll is needed for his direction of motion relative to the character's motion. I use the same roll for the direction to the monster, but aligned from the monster toward the character. In the example at left, on the character's d6=6 the goblin is ahead left. For the goblin's direction, d6=1 would be toward the character, and d6=6 is ahead left. So the goblin is moving in the opposite direction, just offset about 70' from the character's direction of travel.

(In specific terrain circumstances, there may be particulars which suggest a particular direction. For example, a party camping beside a road can expect to be most likely approached from either direction along the road.)

So, is the goblin moving stealthily (20'), normally (30') or fast (40')? That's a die roll for the goblin. For a monster with an explicit stealth characteristic, I'd say usually on d6=2-6 he's moving stealthily. This goblin, on d6=1, was in a hurry (but not enough to move "fast"). Moving fast means detected. Moving stealthily has a -10 modifier (house rule) compared to staying still, as in an ambush. Moving normally has a -20 modifier. Something as stealthy as a goblin may still escape notice. Here, with a high d20 roll, the goblin won't be seen. Assuming the goblin spots the fighter, there's a normal initiative roll-off to see who acts first. If the goblin did not spot the fighter, possible because the fighter is moving stealthily and got a good roll, then the fighter may even get surprise on the goblin. In that case the fighter has surprise and gets a surprise round to do something before the goblin can react.

In the above situation, if neither spots the other initially, time will flow with both continuing as shown until the closest point of approach at 70' when the goblin is to the fighter's left. If neither spots at 70', then the encounter "did not happen." If at less than 100' but at least 70', then one or the other may get a surprise, depending on the other's spotting distance. If the spotting distances are within 10', I generally simply have an initiative roll-off with neither getting surprise. (Single individuals on each side, as here, may be an exception.)

For characters or monsters that do not have an explicit Stealth skill, I use the dexterity modifier plus a modifier for size: +8 for tiny, +4 for small, -4 for large, and -8 for huge. That results in a consideration of +4 for small characters compared to medium ones, which doesn't affect sighting distance as previously described, but does give an advantage once stealth is considered, even when moving normally. Smaller creatures also tend to have higher dexterity attributes anyway.

Multiple monsters to be seen:

If there are multiple monsters of a similar kind, I will still give just one stealth roll for the group, but reduce the roll by the square root of the number of monsters, rounded. So, for 2 goblins, just +5 for Stealth. For 3-6: +4; for 7-12: +3, etc. In terms of probability, the

normal movement
stealth = d20 - 20
= 10 - 20 (+6) = -4

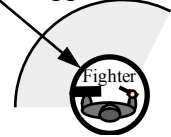


goblin direction
on d6=2

Spotting distance =
[12(pp) - 7(st)] x 10'
= 190' Goblin is spotted.

100'

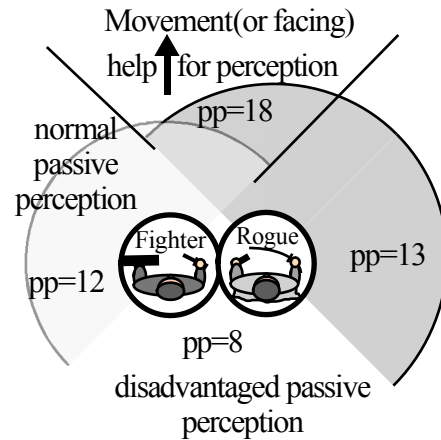
pp=12



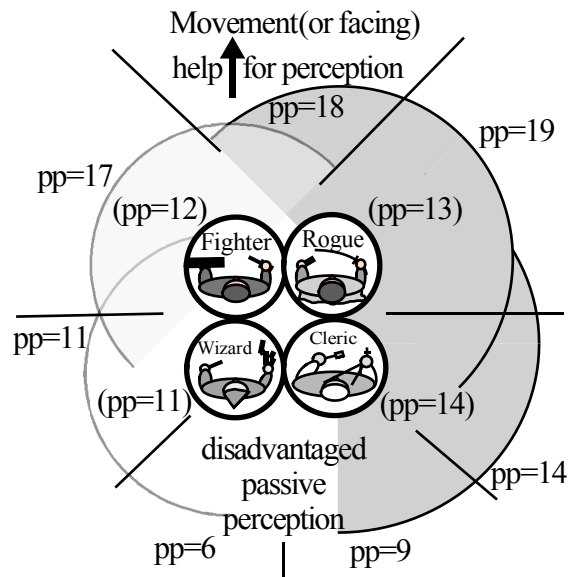
assumption is that these are not independent trials. If the goblins are hiding, they are coordinating that. The number hiding just slightly increases the chances that one or more will be spotted. Something like a colony of tiny snakes or such would tend to hide together too, since that's their normal status. In contrast, unintelligent monsters that are not trying to hide or be stealthy will most likely be seen because of the -20 anyway.

A party of multiple characters:

This changes things considerably, since with multiple characters each one can watch different sectors, and more than one might be keeping a lookout in a given direction. That is most easily illustrated in the example shown here for a two character party walking abreast, as shown here. The left character focuses ahead and to the left, the right character ahead and to the right. The “help” in covering the ahead sector results in a +5 modifier on passive perception (added to the greater of the two passive perceptions). The two characters together have a much better chance of spotting that goblin waiting in ambush ahead. I still assess the behind sector as disadvantaged, since neither character is focusing in that direction. (To “help,” the character having the lesser passive perception must be at least within 5 in pp value to give the +5 benefit.) For a two character party, this is the division of attention I will assume absent player instruction otherwise. The two in single file would have much the same pattern, with the ahead distances figured from the character with the largest passive perception value.



With more than two characters, it's possible to double up on more sectors. Here's a party of four characters where each of the two rear characters gives help to the side. That means that the front half of the party's circle of surveillance has the +5 advantage. There is even at least normal coverage beyond the front 180° to the sides, where any monsters approaching would have to be moving. Directly behind still is at disadvantage for being in the rear 90° sector of all of the characters, with no overlap directly to the rear.



(If the focus of the wizard and cleric were shifted around another 45° toward the rear, the overlapped focus would no longer be disadvantaged, but not advantages since it is to the rear. The cost of doing so is loss of advantage to the front sides where there might be someone waiting in ambush.)

With a party of 6, with two more watching the rear in addition to those shown, there would be advantage in spotting in all directions except for the rear 90° where the two party members are trying to keep watch behind but it's difficult to do so while moving ahead. Conceivably the parrot familiar on the wizard's shoulder could keep a lookout in that direction.

It should be added here that monsters in numbers that are unintelligent, like most giant insects and many reptiles, do not get the “help” benefit because they are not able to plan, infer, or coordinate. Creatures like wolves and others who band together in a protective mass, like sheep or cattle, may receive advantage in spotting.

Stealth Considerations:

Stealth for multiple characters is a bit trickier. For a party of goblins, one die roll is made for all, with the assumption that they act together. The same ought to be true of a party. They are surely trying to be stealthy as a party, not independently. If one is going ahead of others, others would follow in the footsteps to reduce chances of noise, and using the same best cover available. So, when there is a question of whether the monster sees the party, I’ll ask for one die roll for Stealth, and modify for the number of persons in the party just as described earlier.

Here’s an extra issue: One or more members of the party might have disadvantage for Stealth. If that is the case, then the party stealth roll has disadvantage. But, the measurement of distance is from the closest non-stealthy party member, not from the closest party member, which would be the normal case.

Here’s an issue – would somebody be able to “help” someone with disadvantage for stealth? For the party (and for monsters) the reason for disadvantage for stealth is due to armor. That will usually be a vulnerability to being heard due to the metallic sounds from the armor. There’s no helping that, except by keeping the least stealthy party members at the rear. Of course, it’s at the front where you need the best protected party members. However, in a naturally noisy environment, sound will be less useful in spotting enemies, so that disadvantage may be ignored in some exceptional circumstances.

Light and Weather conditions:

The normal spotting description given above is based on normal daylight conditions. What about moonlight or night (without moonlight)? I’m planning to use the same perception scores but with -5 or -10 respectively. (For characters or monsters with darkvision, typically 60’, there will be no modification within the darkvision range.) The invocation of the -5 or especially the -10 modifier implies that sound is becoming the dominant means of detection. Anything that would neutralize sound may further modify this, of course.

In heavy rain or stormy weather, sighting distances drop to half the normal distances given. This reflects both the greater difficulty seeing and the noise masking of wind and rain. If a party is trying to spot enemies into the wind, there will be disadvantage (-5). That applies even to someone on a tower unless some means of mitigating the force of the wind is present. For example, someone could be looking out a window from well within, but for most such cases that would considerably narrow one’s field of view. This technique is most useful for watching a road or some other particular point rather than a wide sector.

Summary:

In most cases, a party of characters of 4 or more should get advantage on passive perception most of the time outdoors. They’ll need it. Even so, spotting goblins, vipers and such is difficult. If the party moves fast, they will get -5 (disadvantage) on perception and will be spotted, giving up surprise to the enemy. You don’t want to be doing that where you may be ambushed by something dangerous. Even moving stealthily there’s still a chance of being ambushed by something, but also chances to surprise.