

FLATFINDER

Proficiency without Level makes a massive change to the core of Pathfinder Second Edition, yet it takes up a single page of GM Core. Exploring all the repercussions of removing level from proficiency bonuses in a single page is impossible, so it's little more than a starting point. This hack attempts to make Proficiency without Level actually usable.

Pathfinder Second Edition is a fantasy TTRPG, but it's also the "engine" that drives all of the adventures Paizo publishes. In that context, adding character level to Proficiency bonuses was a genius move by Paizo, because it makes combat encounters much more predictable and easier to design. However, it also means that character power grows very quickly and so too do the challenges they face.

But this power creep, which will be all too familiar to video gamers, breaks world consistency. For instance, why couldn't this level 18 guard over here have just taken a leisurely vacation and completely annihilated that demon invasion the party painstakingly pushed back at level 10? At least, as long as the party keeps moving, it might make sense that they're consistently moving toward greater challenges, but as soon as they retrace their steps everything tends to fall apart.

Removing level from proficiency bonuses flattens out the power growth, thus reinforcing world consistency and verisimilitude in a sandbox game, especially one that spans levels 1 through 20. This, of course, sacrifices all the good things that scaling proficiency brings, but it does so for a reason. If you don't mind the steep power curve, or if you only plan to run a short adventure, I recommend not bothering with all the hassle that such a profound change to the system brings.

WHAT YOU GAIN

- **Increased world consistency** (good for sandboxes)
- Broader choice of challenges at any given level
- Items with DCs are useful for longer
- Better intuition for good vs bad results

WHAT YOU LOSE

- **Reliable encounter building**
- Time (to adjust stat blocks)

WHY USE FLATFINDER RATHER THAN THE OFFICIAL VARIANT?

Proficiency without Level is an official variant, so I just need to follow what the GM Core book says, and that's that, right? Unfortunately, that isn't the case. The ramifications of the changes go far beyond what can be covered in a single page. Mind you, I'm not blaming Paizo for not going into full detail for an optional variant; in fact, I like the fact that some of the details are left vague to leave some wiggle room for GMs to apply the variants as they see fit. After all, a GM that is looking to change parts of the system, even with Paizo published variants, is probably willing to get their hands a little bit dirty.

However, the changes required to make Proficiency without Level work are quite profound, and they are not immediately apparent. This means that many if not most people playing the variant have not and will not have done enough to make this mode of play feel finished and polished to the same degree as the default game, naturally developing an aversion to it.

And, even for those who might have done the legwork, the amount of things that need to be done naturally lead to massive variance in implementation. This means that you couldn't say "I play with Proficiency without Level" and expect everyone to know exactly what you mean to the same degree that they do when you say "I play with Free Archetype". I'm hoping that this hack can not only improve the experience of people looking to use the variant, but also help with standardization and enable in-depth discussions.

Another reason is that the game experience of Flatfinder is very different from vanilla Pathfinder. When people approaching Pathfinder for the first time see Flatfinder, hopefully they won't assume that it's a minor change to make the game more similar to *other* systems, but rather a significant divergence.

Implementation

THE BASICS

The core of Flatfinder is a change to the proficiency bonus: it no longer changes as you level up. It's +2 for Trained, +4 for Expert, +6 for Master, and +8 for Legendary. Untrained characters receive a proficiency penalty of -2.

The next step is to change the rest of the game to match. Whenever a rules element has a level, reduce all modifiers and DCs by an amount equal to that level. Creatures, hazards, magic items, consumables, and generic Level-based DCs all need to be modified in this way. Do note that item, status and circumstance bonuses/penalties are neither modifiers nor DCs, and flat check DCs should not be adjusted either.

The Proficiency without Level variant goes little further. It just says to retune a couple of tables from the base game, namely Simple DCs and Creature XP, as well as briefly suggesting to use ABP as well, and leaves you to fend for yourself. This is where Flatfinder diverges significantly from the official variant.

WHY IS UNTRAINED -2?

In Pathfinder there is a wide gap between Untrained and Trained proficiency, and the -2 helps keep it somewhat intact. An example of when it is particularly relevant is with heavy armor. A level 2 Wizard is trained in Unarmored Defense. If they had +0 Dex, that would lead to an AC of 12. At level 2, they could afford Full Plate, giving them a 16 to AC, which is only one less than a martial with optimal light or medium armor! With a -2 proficiency penalty, a "tin can Wizard" has a more reasonable 14 AC.

SIMPLE DCs

Simple DCs for Proficiency without Level are unreasonably high and have been chosen with no regards to balance, but only ease of memorization. Flatfinder replaces the Proficiency without Level Simple DCs with the following.

TABLE: FLATFINDER SIMPLE DCs

Proficiency Rank	DC
Untrained	8
Trained	14
Expert	16
Master	18
Legendary	20

This is definitely an improvement over what you find in the GM Core, but there is a glaring issue: difficult checks are way too easy. A level 1 character could realistically succeed at a Legendary DCs, the hardest there is! There are two oft forgotten tools in the GM Core that will help us out of this predicament.

ADJUSTING CHECK DIFFICULTY

Contrary to popular belief, Simple DCs are not there to determine how difficult a check is. That's why a Legendary DC is so easy, because it's not supposed to be hard. It's a regular difficulty check for a character with Legendary proficiency. It just so happens that in Pathfinder a character with Legendary proficiency will also have a high level, thus a very high proficiency bonus.

TABLE: DC ADJUSTMENTS

Difficulty	Adjustment	Rarity
Incredibly easy	-10	-
Very easy	-5	-
Easy	-2	-
Hard	+2	Uncommon
Very hard	+5	Rare
Incredibly hard	+10	Unique

This is what really determines whether a check is easy or hard. The hardest check in the game is thus a DC30 check, that is an Incredibly hard Legendary check. That's not hard enough! A Natural 20 will still net trained level 1 characters a success! Enter...

MINIMUM PROFICIENCY RANK

I'll be honest, in Pathfinder I think I've only seen this used for Hazards, but in Flatfinder it is one of the most important tools in your toolbelt. You can't let the dice decide what a character is capable of to the same extent, because all DCs will always be in reach of your players' characters. If something really is impossible for a character, you need to enforce that limit yourself.

RETROFITTING FIXED DCs

Certain rules elements might have fixed DCs without explicitly referring to the Simple DCs, but we want to retrofit those as well. Find the corresponding proficiency rank in the Pathfinder Simple DCs, then change it to the corresponding Flatfinder Simple DC. See "Miscellaneous Changes" for examples.

COMPETENCE CHECKS

Flatfinder introduces a new type of check, the Competence check. You could interpret it as a check with fixed DC and added granularity, but it is more useful to interpret it as a way to estimate how competently a character faces a challenge before determining the exact difficulty of the task.

A Competence check is a type of skill check, where instead of setting a specific DC, you compare a roll to this table. Then, you determine what that level of competence means in fiction and thus the outcome. So, while with Simple DCs you would translate fiction to math and resolve the math, with Competence Checks you convert the math to fiction and then resolve the fiction, taking into account the tone of the campaign.

As usual, a Natural 1 or Natural 20 shifts your competence level by one. Usually they would translate to an extra -9 or +10, here they are equivalent to a ± 5 .

TABLE: COMPETENCE CHECK THRESHOLDS

Total	Competence Displayed
Negative	Unbelievably bad
0 to 4	Gross
5 to 9	Poor
10 to 14	Decent
15 to 19	Solid
20 to 24	Impressive
25 to 29	Amazing
30 or over	Extraordinary

Competence checks are meant as an alternative for Simple DCs in regular play. When something you didn't expect turns out, something that doesn't have a specific DC and you would have to make one up on the spot, consider a Competence check. In situations where binary results make sense, a simple DC is usually preferred.

COMPETENCE CHECK EXAMPLES

A character is asked to point to the 5 largest cities on a map of Golarion, and thus rolls a Society competence check. Here are some example outcomes.

- **Unbelievably bad:** Asks what the piece of paper in front of them is and claims that looking for cities on paper rather than on the ground is absurd.
- **Gross:** Is only able to name Absalom, then proceeds to point at the wrong place on the map.
- **Poor:** Points to Absalom and one other large city near where they are from, whether or not it actually is one of the 5 largest cities on Golarion.
- **Decent:** Lists 5 large cities, 2 of which aren't actually in the top 5, and correctly places all but one on the map.
- **Solid:** Makes one mistake, either in listing the 5 largest cities or in placing them on the map.
- **Impressive:** Correctly completes the task, listing the cities in descending order of size.
- **Amazing:** Correctly identifies the 10 largest cities and is able to provide a decent estimate of the population size of each city.
- **Extraordinary:** As Amazing, but also points to the approximate location of the ruins of the capital of Old Azlant as an honorable mention.

As you can see, this system allows for a lot of flexibility in the outcome of a task regardless of difficulty and it sidesteps the issue of finding an appropriate Simple DC for a task.

Another example: a character is competing in a marathon with 99 other people (Athletics check).

- **Unbelievably bad:** Trips and hurts themselves on the way to the starting point.
- **Gross:** Gets a sprain within the first 20 minutes.
- **Poor:** Decides to quit a quarter of the way there.
- **Decent:** Makes it 3/4 of the way there, but retires due to shin splints.
- **Solid:** Finishes the race.
- **Impressive:** Finishes in the top 20.
- **Amazing:** Finishes on the podium.
- **Extraordinary:** Wins with a significant margin.

How would you model the scenario with a Simple DC? It would be tricky. With Competence checks you are free to make a ruling you think would feel right to you and your players, without having to worry about the probability distributions of the degrees of success.

MISCELLANEOUS CHANGES

FIRST AID

Change the DC to stabilize to 3 + the recovery roll DC. This makes stabilizing a Dying 1 creature as difficult as a Standard Simple Trained DC.

At level 1, this makes the check easier by one, but while it quickly becomes trivial in Pathfinder, in Flatfinder it doesn't, thus the lowered DC.

TREAT WOUNDS

In Pathfinder, the scaling proficiency bonus consequently scales the expected amount of healing. In Flatfinder that wouldn't happen, so it changes Treat Wounds completely to add scaling back in. After all, despite proficiency bonuses not scaling with level, HP does, and healing should keep up. It also happens to make Treat Wounds more reliable at low levels, though it approximately matches Pathfinder healing rates at higher levels.

In Flatfinder, Treat Wounds is similar to a Medicine competence check. If you roll at least 15, the target regains an amount of HP based on your Medicine proficiency rank and your level (not the level of the target). This amount of healing is further modified based on the result of check. A very low check can damage the target, and a negative total causes the target to become Wounded 1 if it previously didn't have the Wounded condition. If the target regains HP thanks to Treat Wounds, it loses the Wounded condition.

Proficiency Rank	Base Healing
Trained	10
Expert	10 + half your level
Master	10 + level
Legendary	Twice your level

Total	Healing
Negative	1d8 damage, Wounded 1
0 to 4	1d4 damage
5 to 9	No effect
10 to 14	5
15 to 19	Base
20 to 24	Base + 5
25 to 29	Base + 10
30 or over	Base + 20

It is recommended to pre-calculate your Treat Wounds Base healing and write it on your character sheet, akin to Skill bonuses.

RISKY SURGERY

The changes to Treat Wounds break this feat, because the concept of Critical Success doesn't apply. Replace it with the following.

RISKY SURGERY

FEAT 1

GENERAL SKILL

Prerequisites trained in Medicine

Your surgery can bring a patient back from the brink of death, but might push them over the edge. When you Treat Wounds, you can replace the usual table with the following. If you do so, you may not use Assurance to forgo rolling.

Total	Healing
Negative	4d8 damage, Wounded 1
0 to 4	3d8 damage, Wounded 1
5 to 9	2d8 damage
10 to 14	1d8 damage
15 to 19	Base + 10
20 to 24	Base + 15
25 to 29	Base + 20
30 or over	Base + 30

UNTRAINED IMPROVISATION

Obviously, as written, the feat is incompatible with Flatfinder since its bonus scales with level. Replace it with the following.

UNTRAINED IMPROVISATION

FEAT 3

GENERAL

You've learned how to handle situations when you are out of your depth. Your proficiency penalty to untrained skill checks is equal to -0 instead of -2. This doesn't allow you to use the skill's trained actions.

RITUAL DCs

If a ritual has an effect with a save DC, that save is equal to your spell DC. If you do not have a spell DC, the DC is equal to 12 + your highest mental attribute modifier.

In Pathfinder, this backup DC would scale with level; Flatfinder changes that.

AID, LONG JUMP

The typical DC for Aid and Long Jump is the Standard Simple Trained DC. Thus, in Flatfinder the DC is 14.

HIGH JUMP

The DC for High Jump is the Standard Simple Master DC. Thus, in Flatfinder the DC is 18.

Encounter Building

THE BASICS

When you are building encounters, use the Proficiency without Level Creature XP table as reference. Use the same table for Complex Hazards, while Simple Hazards are worth 20% of the XP of a creature of the same level.

KEY ISSUES

Pathfinder's scaling proficiency is one of the things that make encounter difficulty predictable. Given how much stronger a single level makes characters and enemy creatures, the variance in power between different characters and creatures is minimized, and so is the variance in outcome. Flattening proficiencies thus increases relative variance. It also means that the main difference between creatures of different power levels is not proficiency, but damage, health and special abilities.

Pathfinder already has certain infamous creatures that, when used as Level + 3 bosses, have resistances, immunities or abilities which the party might not have the tools to counteract (eg. Will-o'-Wisp). It also has creatures where most if not all of the stats are in the High to Extreme ranges, as well as having very strong abilities, which overall result in a threat level comparable to creatures one level higher (eg. OGL Dragons).

In Flatfinder, those issues are magnified. Given that you might consider using a level + 7 boss, you need to be extra careful that the resistances, immunities and special abilities are reasonable. And, when a creature is overtuned for its level, what might be a 1 level difference in Pathfinder might equate to a 2 or 3 level difference in threat in Flatfinder.

CREATURE BALANCE

The best way to ensure that creatures are balanced is to make them yourself, or at least double check premade creatures their modifiers to make sure that there is a balanced spread of High, Moderate and Low modifiers for that given level. Of course, remember to subtract creature level from modifiers (not attributes).

ENCOUNTER BALANCE

The most surefire way to make a balanced encounter is to not outnumber the party and to not have any excessively strong enemies. If you have a party of 4 level 5 PCs, they have the advantage against 4 level 3 enemies, or 2 level 5 enemies. The XP budget says that these two would be Moderate threat encounters, but you don't need the XP budget to tell you that.

On the other hand, a single level 9 monster or a group of 7 level -1 creatures should also be Moderate threat XP-wise, but depending on specific abilities, both the party's and the foes', the actual threat might be significantly different. Try to evaluate if your party is better equipped for crowd control or single target fights when building encounters with unbalanced numbers, and adjust the encounter accordingly.

Those times when you want to use large groups or single monster fights, it is best to let the players

Creature's Level	XP
Party level - 7	9
Party level - 6	12
Party level - 5	14
Party level - 4	18
Party level - 3	21
Party level - 2	26
Party level - 1	32
Party level	40
Party level + 1	48
Party level + 2	60
Party level + 3	72
Party level + 4	90
Party level + 5	108
Party level + 6	135
Party level + 7	160

approach these encounters at their own pace (see the next section), allowing them to prepare for the unique requirements of the specific encounter, such as crowd control or specific damage types.

SANDBOX ENCOUNTER PHILOSOPHY

If you are playing Flatfinder, you are probably playing a sandbox game. In sandbox campaigns encounter balancing often becomes secondary, and it becomes the party's responsibility to evaluate the threat of an enemy. You still need to have a rough idea of the threat that different foes pose, because all of the party's information should come through you. That said, if your players are aware that an encounter is not hand-crafted for them, the expectation of encounter balance lessens.

ELITE AND WEAK TEMPLATES

In Flatfinder, these templates change creature level by 2 rather than 1, even outside of levels -1 through 1. When applying the weak template to a creature of level -1, 0 or 1, do not adjust damage or HP values. The same applies when using the elite template on a creature of level -1 or 0. Using the Weak template, you can create creatures with an effective level of -3 or -2.