

# THE HP CANCEL

“Hit point cancel” is less of a rule and more of a D&D design theory precept that I’ve developed over the years. It is implemented in Coup as a rule of the same name.

The theory background is that I do not believe that save-or-die effects are fundamentally consistently playable in the game unless they are universally contested by hit points. In D&D rules where this is not the case only one of the following is possible:

- Attack damage scales with level. High HP targets can be fought because conventional combat and crippling status effects are nearly as quick and decisive. (Undesirable, cowardly design to my mind.)
- Status effect combat becomes dominant over attempting to reduce enemy HP. Grinding an enemy down even with favourable exchange ratios (they take more damage than you do) is so slow that a crippling status effect is always more desirable. (Undesirable, perverted design.)

To retain what I believe to be the ideal of the D&D combat system, hit points must be respected as a formal mechanical weight that must be contested directly to win a fight. A 100 HP dragon should not be brought low by a low level save-or-die spell.

One could go all “well, remove status effects altogether” here, but that’s hardly desirable either. I imagine the reasons are obvious. No, a balance needs to be struck.

The design principle of HP cancel could be implemented by writing all spells and other status effect sources (monster

abilities, grappling, traps, etc.) to respect hit points; you'd get lots of "if the target currently has under 40 HP, this thing happens" and "the target takes 40 HP of damage, if this is sufficient to take them to zero this thing happens". 4e D&D takes this approach.

Coup is more of a dynamic rulings-based process using a wide variety of gaming resources in the campaign, so it's more feasible to use a quick and dirty hack to accomplish the same thing. Thus, the universal HP cancel rule:

**If an enemy does something untowards to a character, they can pay hit points to cancel, mitigate or avoid the effect.**

We can quibble about the definitions of "enemy" and "something" and whatnot, but the spirit of the rule is this: others should not be able to bring you down without bringing your HP down as well. If there is a form of combat that allows that, HP should apply to it.

The cost of the HP cancel is 5 HP to attain an extra save die\* to shake off a natural undesirable effect. Further benchmarks are provided for formally mechanized effects:

**Monster powers:** 5 HP per HD

**Class features:** 5 HP per caster level

**Spells:** 10 HP per spell level

**Items:** 10 HP per magic item bonus rank

The pricing of the HP cancel is calibrated to be excessive for *level-appropriate* threats. Ideally a character can only ever afford to HP cancel lower-level concerns, and even then they might prefer to suffer the effect instead of canceling it out. HP cancel here is the last resort you take, when all else fails.

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\* CWP #8, *Tasks and Skills*; the HP cancel save dice are weak unless the character has a strong die for the situation, in which case they are strong.