

QUICK PRIMER FOR **OLD SCHOOL GAMING**



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QUICK PRIMER FOR OLD SCHOOL GAMING (2024)

INTRODUCTION

Why am I reading this?

If you found this little piece of writing because you were looking for it, then feel free to skip this section and read on! If you weren't looking for it, this Primer is often handed to gamers by someone who wants to try a type of gaming that was more common in the early days of Dungeons & Dragons. So, you might have been *asked* to take a look at it — in which case, I should explain myself. In the world of roleplaying gamers, some like clear, unambiguous rules that cover all situations. But another group often feels like the game seems a little sterile, just moving the pieces and rolling the dice. If you ever get that feeling, this little booklet is written to describe a type of early Dungeons & Dragons play that's a bit more freewheeling and improvisational than the way the modern game is played. I don't mean to suggest that there's anything wrong with the modern method, but I do mean to suggest that the modern method isn't for everyone, and that there is an alternative. Old school gaming is well supported by lots of publishers, and if something seems not-quite-right to you about modern D&D, it might be that you're the kind of player who enjoys the older school approach. And if you're perfectly happy with D&D as your group is playing it, then you might not be — but hopefully this is still an interesting read, offering some insights into the way D&D was originally played.

What Are the Original Old School Games?

Original D&D, which was printed as a boxed set of 3 booklets and had supplemental booklets published, was originally produced in 1974. The three-booklet boxed set is often called the "White Box" to distinguish it from the fully-supplemented Original D&D. This edition is sometimes also called "0e." The main retro-clone of this edition is *Swords & Wizardry*.

First Edition Advanced D&D (usually called "1e") was published beginning in 1978 with the *Monster Manual*. The main retro-clone of this edition is *OSRIC*.

The *Holmes Blue Book* was a Basic set published in 1978. Retro-clones of this edition include *Blueholme*.

Moldvay Basic/Expert was a Basic Set published in 1981, with an Expert-level supplement. Retro-clones include *Labyrinth Lord*, *OSE*, and (to a slightly lesser degree) *BFRPG*.

BECMI (another Basic-plus-supplement set, published in 1983) and *Second Edition Advanced D&D* (1989) are also old-school editions, although when these were published, they were already beginning to be affected by business-driven decisions that created some divergence from the very earliest of the editions.

This primer was originally written in 2008, as an introduction to “old school” gaming, designed especially for anyone who started playing fantasy role-playing games after, say, the year 2000 – but it’s also for longer-time players who have slowly shifted over to modern styles of role-playing over the years. The main objectives of the Primer were to describe what’s generally meant by “old school gaming,” and to give some tips for how to overcome the biggest difficulty in going from modern play to an old school style — the perception that a less-complex set of rules is somehow “incomplete.”

The original version of the Primer discussed third edition D&D (“3e”) as the example of “modern” gaming, and this one discusses the fifth edition (“5e”). It’s worth noting that 5e made a lot of moves away from the elegant, interlocked, comprehensive system of 3e in the direction of wonky, limited-scope older-school gaming, so some of the points of comparison I’m making in this version of the primer are a bit different than in the first version.

Despite the fact that the difference is easily explained, it’s actually quite difficult for someone who learned to play with a modern system to actually grasp *in practice* how the old school type of game operates. If you try to play using old school *rules* but without the improvisational *mindset*, you’re going to have a wreckage of a game, always looking for rules that aren’t there and concluding that the rules left out all sorts of critical information. The jump to understanding old school gaming tends to happen in one or more flashes of insight, so I’ve outlined four “Zen Moments” that I think embody the main flashes of insight where a fundamental modern game concept is turned on its head by the older approach. These are areas where your most basic assumptions about gaming probably need to be reversed, if you want to experience what real OSR playing is all about. I call them Zen Moments because they sound completely and impossibly wrong to the modern gamer’s ear, but once you accept the mirror-image logic of this approach, it suddenly makes sense as a system, like the reversed world of Alice-in-the-Looking-Glass.

There are two critical things to understand about old school gaming, as I mean the term:

1. Old school systems don’t have many rules for the players to learn. Most of the rules are for the “Game Master” or “Dungeon Master” (a person we’re going to call the “Referee” because that fits better with the old-school methodology), and they are really guidelines, not rules. The Referee can choose whether or when to apply these rules, and the players rely on the Referee to be impartial when doing so. Using an old school system is more about making rulings than applying or interpreting rules.

2. The risk level in an old school game is almost always based on *where* you are, not *who* you are. In other words, the world has an existence apart from the characters, usually created by random tables, and if you’re in a dangerous place, you will encounter dangerous monsters regardless of your character level. On the other hand, if you survive, the reward ratio is much higher.

IN GENERAL: ZEN MOMENTS

I call these “Zen Moments” because there are a couple of intuitive barriers which tend to get in the way of playing using older school methods for those who learned to play using a modern system of D&D (post 2000). For whatever reason, those barriers tend to hang around until there’s an “Aha!” moment where everything snaps into place. So, I’ve tried to write this Primer to create that sudden moment of intuitive understanding, a paradigm shift.

A POTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIER

When you’re reading this, don’t think it’s an attack on modern D&D (which, at the time I’m writing, is Fifth Edition). Fifth edition is a strong ruleset for Dungeons & Dragons. But what I’m doing here is pointing out that the overall methods of the game have changed a great deal over time: so much so that you can perceive two different approaches to playing, quite different from each other. Some gamers are entirely happy with the modern approach, but others fall more naturally into the old school approach to the game. This Primer is an attempt to introduce that older style and explain how it works.

FIRST ZEN MOMENT: RULINGS, NOT RULES

I believe that the *defining* characteristic of an old school system is that it’s improvisational, played mostly with **Rulings, not Rules**. As mentioned above, old school systems don’t have many rules for the players to learn. Most of the rules are for the Referee, and they are really guidelines, not rules. The Referee can choose whether or when to apply these rules, and the players rely on the Referee to be impartial when doing so.

There’s a lot to unpack in that paragraph above. It’s not clear what I mean without some examples, and it’s also not yet clear why it makes a difference.

When you sit down to play a game of modern Dungeons & Dragons, you do so with a few social assumptions. You’ve all spent some time learning the rules to some extent, and the assumption is that the Referee is going to follow those rules. You spend time deciding which skills your character will take, and what combat abilities, and so on, through a fairly long process of character generation. If the Referee disregards the way those skills work, and the way “difficult terrain” operates in combat, and keeps improvising alternate methods, it feels like they are breaking the social contract of the game table.

So here is the crux of old school D&D, and how it differs from modern D&D. The social contract is different. The Referee’s *main role* in old school D&D is to improvise rulings that fit the circumstances.

A psychological barrier may have just jumped up in your mind, right? Because if one game doesn’t have rules for everything, and another game does, why bother playing the one without the rules? Why put one of the people at the gaming table into a position of such power over the game if you can just play a different, more complete version?

The reason is this: it’s an entirely different game. Modern D&D is like a game of Bridge, where the rules are clear, and Old School D&D is more like a tarot reading, where one person has a highly interpretive role in what’s happening. Both “games” use cards, but the experiences are totally different. Modern D&D and old school D&D might both have “D&D” in the name, but they are entirely different games at a very fundamental level. Old school D&D has a much more improvisational element to it, both for the Referee (who is improvising rulings) and for the players (who are improvising solutions to obstacles in the game). It’s not everyone’s cup of tea, but then modern D&D isn’t everyone’s cup of tea either. If playing a game of modern D&D feels like you’re just “rolling the dice and moving your mice,” you might be one of the players who actually prefers the older style of play.

I’m going to keep using the word improvisational quite a bit, because I think it’s the key to understanding how the social contracts of the two games are different. The question isn’t “Why would I play a game that doesn’t have rules for everything and gives lots of power to the Referee,” the question is “Do I prefer a game that’s highly improvisational, or do I prefer a game with comprehensive rules?”

Do I prefer a game that's highly improvisational, or do I prefer a game with comprehensive rules?

Just like the Referee of a Modern D&D game has a basket of resolution mechanisms such as “Perception Check,” “To hit roll,” “Saving Throw,” and “Ability Check,” the Old-School Referee also has a basket, and a lot of the content is the same. But some of it is different. It includes resolutions like, “just roll 1d6 and if it's a 1, then the thing happens,” and, “This one they have to figure out, without any die rolls.”

There's also a difference in terms of what the *players* expect, as mentioned earlier. The Modern Referee is going to feel constrained by the social contract to allow a Dexterity Check when the rules call for a Dexterity Check. The Old-School Referee, since “Dexterity Check” isn't a formal part of the rules, isn't breaking the social contract by deciding that, “you need to tell me whether you're going to cut the blue wire or the red wire to disable that trap.”

So, at this point, you've probably absorbed the point that there's a valid difference between a highly improvisational game (old school style) and one that's better defined with comprehensive rules (modern D&D, meaning roughly third edition and later). That doesn't really tell you how to play an improvisational old-school type of game, though, it just tells you it's out there somewhere, somehow. Fun? Might be — can't tell yet?

That's fair. Let's keep going.

In the next section I'll describe a bit of old-school improvisational ruling, so you can get a feel for how it works in the context of an improvisational social contract, but first let's talk about the second Zen Moment. What I'm hoping you take away from this one is that old school games aren't incomplete; rather, they are a complete basis for a more improvisational game than you probably think of D&D as being. And that changes how the game works and feels.

SECOND ZEN MOMENT: PLAYER SKILL, NOT CHARACTER ABILITIES

Before second edition, D&D didn't have any kind of generalized skill system for things like athletics, acrobatics, arcane knowledge, animal handling, deception, and so on. There also wasn't a formalized “ability check.” There were a few skill-like abilities hardwired into the character classes: thieves had several skills like “Climb Walls” and “Find Traps,” and rangers had a system for following tracks. For the most part, though, skills like these didn't have a specific rule, and this is the main area where old-school D&D was, as we just discussed, mainly improvisational.

So, how do you know if your character can do something? You tell the Referee what you want to try. Most Referees will give you an idea of the probabilities, and most will also entertain a reasonable discussion about whether their first guess at a probability is fair.

Here is an example of how this works. First let's look at the 5e method for comparison.

A PIT TRAP (5E METHOD):

Referee: “A ten-foot wide corridor leads north into the darkness.”

John the Rogue: “I check for traps.”

Referee: “What's your modifier on a Perception check?”

John the Rogue: “Plus four.”

Referee: Decides that the pit trap in front of the party is a standard type of trap, and assigns a DC of “medium,” meaning that John needs to roll a 15 or higher on the Perception check. The GM rolls secretly, and gets a 12, meaning that with his +4 modifier, John succeeded in seeing the trap.

Referee: “Probing ahead of you, you find a thin crack in the floor — it looks like there's a pit trap. It's a closed trap door that blocks the entire corridor.”

John the Rogue: “Can I disarm it? Jam it so it won't open and we can walk over safely?”

Referee: “Let's say that's just a plain Dexterity check.”

John the Rogue: “I rolled a 15.”

Referee: “Okay, moving carefully, you're able to jam the mechanism so the trap won't open.”

John the Rogue: “We walk across. I go first.”

Now let's do a pit trap using the rules from Original D&D.

First, what's the rule? “Traps are usually sprung by a roll of 1 or a 2 when any character passes over or by them. Pits will open in the same manner.” (Underworld & Wilderness Adventures, page 9). There is no perception rule in OD&D at all, so the “perception” here is basically springing the trap without suffering damage. How is that done?

The answer is a ten-foot pole, which would at the very least give you that 2-in-6 chance of opening the pit trap. Most Referees treated an open-topped pit trap as automatically detected with a ten-foot pole, and gave the 2-in-6 chance to detect (spring) a closed-top pit trap. It's a matter of player skill to bring and use a ten-foot pole when exploring a dungeon, not something that's on the character sheet. So the old-school pit trap might look something like this:

Referee: “A ten-foot wide corridor leads north into the darkness.”

John the Roguish: “We move forward, poking the floor ahead with our ten foot pole.”

Referee: [Is about to say that the pole pushes open a pit trap, when he remembers something.]

“Wait, you don't have the ten foot pole any more. You fed it to the stone idol.”

If the party still had the pole, John would have detected the trap automatically, so for the sake of this example we've got to eliminate the pole.

John the Roguish: “I didn’t feed it to the idol, the idol ate it when I poked its head.”

Referee: “That doesn’t mean you have the pole back. Do you go into the corridor?”

John the Roguish: “No. I’m suspicious. Can I see any cracks in the floor, maybe shaped in a square?”

Referee: “Are you going to search for traps? It takes a turn and you get a 1 in 6 chance to spot a trap without setting it off.”

This is a house rule, and not a particularly common one. This particular Referee allows thief characters to search for traps as if they were secret doors, which is an example of improvisational ruling. So what’s being asked here is if the thief wants to spend a full turn (and a 1 in 6 chance of encountering a wandering monster) to get a 1 in 6 chance of discovering a pit trap. Mathematically, that’s a losing proposition for the characters, but the Referee is just reminding them that it’s an option.

John the Roguish: “No, that would take too much time. I just want to look and see if there’s any kind of pattern that might indicate a trap.”

The Referee knows there’s a pit trap right where John is looking, but it’s also dark, and these traps are supposed to represent at least a minor danger. There’s a good chance that since John is suspicious about this particular corridor, that’s enough reason for the Referee to decide that John can spot the pit trap since he’s looking for it in the right place. But to continue our example we’re going to assume that this Referee, who allows a search, also doesn’t allow automatic detection of a trap just because you’re looking in the right place.

Referee: “No, there are about a million cracks in the floor. You wouldn’t see a pit trap that easily, anyway.”

John the Roguish: “Okay. I take out my waterskin from my backpack. And I’m going to pour some water onto the floor. Does it trickle through the floor anywhere, or reveal some kind of pattern?”

Referee: “Yeah, the water seems to be puddling a little bit around a square shape in the floor where the square is a little higher than the rest of the floor.”

John the Roguish: “Like there’s a covered pit trap?”

Referee: “Could be.”

John the Roguish: “Can I disarm it?”

Referee: “How?”

John the Roguish: “I don’t know, maybe make a die roll to jam the mechanism?”

Referee: “You can’t see a mechanism. You step on it, there’s a hinge, you fall. What are you going to jam?”

John the Roguish: “I don’t know. Okay, can we walk around it, or does it fill the whole corridor?”

Referee: “You can walk around it. There’s about a two-foot clearance on each side.”

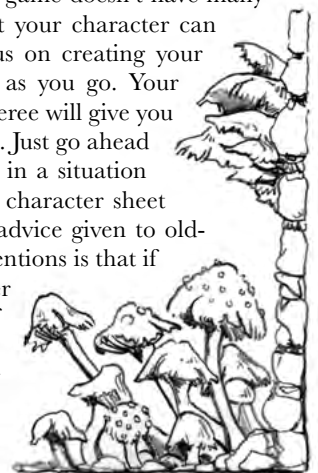
There are a couple of things to take note of here. First, there are several places where the Referee makes a judgement call. The first is a general house rule: allowing thieves to search for traps like secret doors. The second is a ruling: deciding that John’s attempt to find the pit trap using water succeeds automatically. The third is a factual determination, not a ruling: the decision that this is a trap that can’t be disabled or jammed. That would be a little bit questionable in a later edition when faced with a character who is seeing “Disable a trap” specifically listed as an option under the uses of a Dexterity check. However, if this Referee uses ability checks, it’s at the Referee’s option, not something the players necessarily *expect* to see used.

A second thing to notice about this is the back and forth of questions. This happens in modern D&D as well, of course, because it’s how the whole game is played. But in an old-school system without perception checks or intelligence checks, it tends to be more intense and detailed, and focuses more heavily on facts about the surroundings. If you’ve played fifth edition but not a pre-2000 edition, the old school method basically *always* sounds like it does in fifth edition when you’re pretty darn sure that everyone failed a perception check, and you’re trying to figure out what you missed.

Now let’s look at it from the players’ side.

Knowing to probe ahead with a ten-foot pole isn’t in the rules anywhere. That’s an example of players using player skill rather than an ability on a character sheet. The example of using water to detect a pit trap is a little over the top, but I wanted to re-emphasize the way that old school players try to employ gadgets, tools, and tricks of the trade. A pit trap isn’t a big deal, but it’s an easy way to model a more complicated trap, where it becomes a puzzle, and it’s a battle of wits to find a way around something that’s obviously quite deadly. The 5e method tends to erase a lot of the puzzle-solving part of the game by allowing (or in the eyes of an overly-determined player, *requiring*) die rolls to solve part of the problem.

Key tip for players: An old-school type of game doesn’t have many rules for you to remember about what your character can do. When learning the rules, just focus on creating your character, and leave the rest to learn as you go. Your character can try anything, and the Referee will give you a rough idea of your chances of success. Just go ahead and think what you yourself might do in a situation rather than worrying about what your character sheet says you can do. A common piece of advice given to old-school Referees running games at conventions is that if the players are looking at their character sheets, they aren’t “getting it,” but if they are looking at the Referee or each other, they have gotten the trick of how this sort of game operates.



There's a related issue here as well, which isn't exclusive to old-school gaming (although many old schoolers consider it to be a major aspect of the old-school style of play). Old-style play is about keeping your character alive and making that character into a legend. The player's skill is the character's guardian angel – call it the character's luck or intuition, or whatever makes sense to you, but don't hold back on your skill as a player just because the character has a low intelligence. Role-playing is part of the game, but it's not a suicide pact with your character.

In other words, these games aren't usually played as “what my character would do.” There's nothing wrong with playing a heavy roleplaying type of game, but a look at the early editions of the game make it pretty clear that while roleplaying is *definitely* considered to be what makes the game really fun, there's an even stronger beer and pretzels side to the game. The story is what develops from all the unexpected occurrences while playing the game's primary engine: exploring, fighting, figuring out mysteries, and gaining levels. Staying alive and “beating” the beer and pretzels side of the game is (in general old school thinking) seen as the primary challenge. D&D started out as a wargame, and it has a lot of wargaming DNA.

THIRD ZEN MOMENT: HEROIC, NOT SUPER-HEROIC

Old-style games have a human-sized scale, not a super-powered scale. At first level, adventurers are barely more capable than a regular person. They live by their wits. This isn't linked to the fact that old-school rules are generally more improvisational and less rules-heavy than modern ones, but I think it's a common enough aspect of old school gaming tables to mention here.

Even as characters rise to the heights of power, they aren't picking up super-abilities or high ability scores. Truly high-level characters have precious items accumulated over a career of adventuring; they usually have some measure of political power, at least a stronghold. They are deadly when facing normal opponents ... but they aren't invincible. Old school gaming (and again, this is a matter of taste) is the fantasy of taking a starting character without tremendous powers – a person much like yourself but somewhat stronger, or with slight magic powers – and becoming a king or a feared sorcerer over time. It's not about someone who can, at the start of the game, take on ten club-wielding peasants at once. It's got a real-world, gritty starting point. And your character isn't personally ever going to become stronger than a dragon. At higher levels, they may be able to kill a dragon with his sword or with spells, but never by grabbing its throat and strangling it in a one-on-one test of strength. To make a comic-book analogy, characters don't become Superman; they become Batman. And they don't start as Batman – Batman is the pinnacle. He's a bit faster than normal, a bit stronger than normal, he's got a lot of cash, a Bat Cave, a butler, a henchman (Robin) and cool gadgets. But he can't leap tall buildings in a single bound. If you don't get a feeling of achievement with Batman instead of Superman as the goal, the most common version of the old school gaming style may not match perfectly with your vision of what makes good and exciting fantasy. Old school gaming is about the triumph of the little guy into an epic

hero, not the development of an epic hero into a superhuman being. There's nothing wrong with the latter, it's just that old-style fantasy matches up with the former.

Which brings us to the often-repeated comment that old school games involve more character deaths while playing. While it's true that a simple game system works better if you want to play that way (because it takes less time to create a new character), lots of old school players reduce the potential lethality by starting at level 2, or by giving maximum hit points at first level. It's by no means a requirement. Even if you start at level 2 or with maximum hit points, the point about heroic versus super-heroic stays true all the way up the scale until very, very high level.

The other reason besides heroic-vs-superheroic that old school games have a reputation for lethality is because of the way risks are allocated ... which is the point of the next Zen Moment.

FOURTH ZEN MOMENT: FORGET GAME BALANCE

Risk and reward, in an old school game, are based on *where* you are, not *who* you are.

The old-style campaign is within a fantasy world, with all its perils, contradictions, and surprises: it's not a “game setting” which somehow always produces challenges of just the right difficulty for the party's level of experience. The party has no “right” only to encounter monsters they can defeat, no “right” only to encounter traps they can disarm, no “right” to invoke a particular rule from the books, and no “right” to a die roll in every particular circumstance. This sort of situation isn't a mistake in the rules.

The original rules were very much what's often called “simulationist,” in the sense that they contained random generation tables for encounters, and guidelines for what monsters would be in a particular dungeon level or wilderness hex. What you encountered wasn't because of the Referee, it was because of the random tables and the guidelines. The “world” existed as an opponent, much like the world of a video game, pre-programmed even if it contained random elements. Surviving and thriving in this world, as mentioned above, was the primary objective of the game. Now, after lots and lots of repetitions, a single default world can get boring, and handling this problem has been the main objective of D&D publishers since 1974. More monsters, more adventures, and variant random encounter tables all add depth to the game, but the idea that the world is the opponent rather than the Referee, that certain unexpectedly difficult monsters might appear at the roll of a die, remains very much an “old school” concept when it's placed in contrast to the idea that characters should encounter challenges based on *who* they are, rather than *where* they are.

Know When to Run

A good Referee is impartial: they don't favor the party, and they don't favor the monsters. But the GM isn't playing a tournament against the players, restricted by rules and required to offer up well-gauged, well-balanced challenges. Instead, the Referee is there to be an impartial referee for the characters' adventures in a fantasy world – NOT in a “game setting.” Even on the first level of a dungeon, there might

be challenges too difficult for a first-level party of adventurers. Ask the one-armed guy in the tavern; he may know. If you didn't think of checking the tavern for one-armed men, that was a minor failure in your skill as a player.

Game balance just isn't terribly important in old-style gaming. It's not a tournament where the players are playing *against* the Referee. It's more like a story with dice: the players describe their actions, the referee describes the results, and the story of the characters, epic or disastrous, grows out of the combined efforts of referee and players. *The referee will be just as surprised by the results as the players are.*

The rules aren't fragile, and the game doesn't collapse if someone makes a little mistake or one character is temporarily more powerful than the others, or an encounter is "too hard." Sometimes the referee will make a bad call. These aren't tragedies. A roleplaying game doesn't break if you push the wrong buttons. Game balance just isn't a critical matter.

One last point about game balance, though. In terms of the social contract at the game table, just as the players have no right to depend upon a rule in the book, the Referee has no right to tell the player what a character decides to do. That's the player's decision (unless there's a charm spell going). The Referee in an old-style game has much more "power" than in a modern game, and may become tempted to dictate what characters are doing as well. If this happens, the

whole game becomes nothing more than one person telling a story while others roll dice. Just as it can with a modern-style game, this sort of behavior severely damages the fun of the game. You don't make chess moves for your opponent in a game of chess, and the Referee doesn't play the characters in a roleplaying game.

Key Tip for players: Think of these two kinds of video games: (1) the ones that have certain areas that are riskier than others, and then (2) the sort where the whole game just gets more difficult as your character gets stronger, regardless of where you are. Old school gaming is like the first type of game, where the area you're in defines the risk. And there's a lot of randomness involved. So, you'll sometimes run into easy encounters, and sometimes run into one that's very dangerous even for the risk level associated with that area. Know when to run, because the encounter difficulty is based on where you chose to go, not on your level. The deeper in a dungeon you go, usually the riskier it is. Wilderness might all be the same level of risk, but ask the Referee about safer roads and safer areas to see. If all else fails, do your traveling with a caravan.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, while there's really only one underlying characteristic that defines an old-school system (an open-ended, fairly simple set of rules), there are several other characteristics that are either merely typical of old school play or are more easily accomplished when you're using an old school system.

- They are heroic, but not superheroic (at least not until very high levels).
- Slower progression from level to level in actual time. Publishers have realized over time that a faster progression keeps people playing the game, so this is more just a fact that's rooted in history. Nevertheless, it's something to be aware of in case you want to alter it.
- Experience points are given for achievements in addition to just killing monsters (usually this is measured in gold pieces, but many Referees give "mission bonuses" for adventures that don't have much treasure).
- Tinkering with the rules by introducing house rules is very common, and in fact some degree of this was necessary due to ambiguities in the early rules. If you enjoy tinkering with rules or introducing new rules-based ideas into the game, it's generally easier if you're starting with a simpler system instead of a highly-interlocked, elegant game system.
- Risk and reward are determined by where you are, not how powerful you are. Choose your destinations wisely, and be prepared to retreat if you encounter something that's out of your league.
- Sandbox-type games, where the players decide where to go and what to do with little guidance from the Referee, are common in old school games. This type of game is generally a bit easier for the Referee to run using a simpler, old-school system because the prep time is somewhat lower than it is for a more complex system. The difference isn't huge, though, if you've got good resources for the modern game; I think this is less common in modern games because publishers present adventures as a story arc rather than producing resources for generating story through randomness.



TIPS FOR PLAYERS

We've mentioned that old-school play has a large component of play-skill. Here are a few of the things that are useful to know:

1. View the entire area you've mapped out as the battleground; don't plan on taking on monsters in a single room. They may try to out-flank you by running down corridors. Establish rendezvous points where the party can fall back to a secure defensive position.
2. Scout ahead, and try to avoid wandering monsters which don't carry much treasure. You're in the dungeon to find the treasure-rich lairs. Trying to kill every monster you meet will weaken the party before you find the rich monsters.
3. Don't assume you can defeat any monster you encounter.

4. Keep some sort of map, even if it's just a flow chart. If you get lost, you can end up in real trouble – especially in a dungeon where wandering monster rolls are made frequently.
5. Ask lots of questions about what you see. Look up. Ask about unusual stonework. Test floors before stepping.
6. Protect the magic-user. The magic-user is the nuclear weapon.
7. Hire some cannon fodder. Don't let the cannon fodder start to view you as a weak source of treasure.
8. Spears can usually reach past your first rank of fighters, so a phalanx of hirelings works well.
9. Check in with the grizzled one-armed guy in the tavern before each foray; he may have suddenly remembered more details about the area.

TIPS FOR THE REFEREE

You've realized by now that your job in an old-style game is a lot different than it is in a modern-style game. Your job isn't to remember and apply rules correctly, it's to make up on-the-spot rulings and describe them colorfully. It's your job to answer questions (some of which will be off-the-wall) and to give the players lots and lots of decisions to make. You are the rulebook, and there is no other. Just as the players need to lose the idea that their characters are in a level-appropriate, tournament-like environment, you've got to lose the idea that situations are governed by rules. They're not governed by rules, they're governed by you. Focus on making the situations fun, not on making them properly run.

The Way of the Ming Vase

If you've got a choice between running a predictable, fairly-executed combat, or on the other hand running a combat in which swords break, people fall, someone throws up from a blow to the stomach, a helmet goes spinning away, someone gets tangled up in a curtain, or other such events outside the formal rules ... embrace the chaos. This is the rule of the Ming Vase. Why is it the rule of the Ming Vase? Look at it this way. There's a priceless Ming Vase sitting on a table in the middle of a room where combat rages on all sides, swords swinging, chairs flying, crossbow bolts whizzing through the air. There is, however, no rule covering the chance of some random event that might affect the priceless Ming Vase. I'm not sure I need to say more, but just in case, I will. If someone rolls a natural "1," or a "3," or even if nothing specifically happens to trigger it, it's blatantly irresponsible of you not to start some chain of events involving the Ming vase. A sword goes flying – the table underneath the vase is hit by the sword – the vase is swaying back and forth, ready to topple – can anyone catch it, perhaps making a long dive-and-slide across the floor? That's gaming. Is it unfair? Well, it's certainly outside the existing rules. It's your job to create events outside the standard sequence of "I roll to hit. They roll to hit. I roll to hit."

In combat, bad die rolls can spontaneously generate bad consequences (make sure you do this to both sides, not just the players). You don't need a table to generate bad consequences – just make it up on the spot. Good rolls might get good consequences, such as disarming the foe, making him fall, smashing him against a wall for extra damage, pushing him backward, etc. Again, make it up on the spot. Remember the Ming Vase!

The Way of the Moose Head

Without Perception and Intelligence checks, players don't have a way to generate solutions by rolling dice and checking their character sheets. They have to think. That's how player skill comes into the game. Here is an example of exploring a room where a secret compartment is hidden behind a moose head on the wall.

The Mysterious Moose Head (Old Style)

John the Roguish: "We open the door. Anything in the room?"

Referee: "No monsters. There's a table, a chair, and a moose head hanging on the wall."

John the Roguish: "We check the ceiling and the floor – we don't step in yet. If there's

nothing on the ceiling and the floor, we push down on the floor with the ten foot pole, and then I step inside, cautiously."

Referee: "Nothing. You're in the room."

John the Roguish: "I search the room."

Referee: "What are you checking?"

John the Roguish: "I eyeball the table and chairs to see if there's anything unusual, then I run my hands over them to see if there's anything weird."

Referee: "Nope."

John the Roguish: "Are the moose's eyes following me or anything?"

Referee: "No."

John the Roguish: "I check the moose head."

Referee: "How?"

John the Roguish: "I twist the horns, look in the mouth, see if it tips sideways ..."

Referee: "When you check to see if it tips sideways, it slides a little to the side."

John the Roguish: "I slide it more."

Referee: "There's a secret compartment behind it."

Basically, in an old-school game, die rolls don't provide a short cut or a crutch to discover and solve all those interesting puzzles and clues scattered throughout a dungeon. The same goes for handling traps (unless there's a thief class).

You might be saying to yourself: "Wow, that sounds time-consuming." Sure enough, this sort of detailed exploration of the adventure area occupies more time in old-style gaming than it does in modern gaming. Early D&D is a game of exploration, searching, and figuring things out just as much as it's a game of combat. Game designers, over the years, decided that the game should focus on the fighting and the more cinematic moments of the game, with less time "wasted" on the exploration and investigation side of things.

Over time, the publishers of D&D put more and more detail into combat rules, and die rolls have largely replaced the part of the game that focused on mapping, noticing details, experimentation, and deduction. Don't conclude, though, that the exploration part of the game makes everything slower. Combat is so much faster-paced in Original D&D that there's more time available for the exploration/thinking part of the game. In my experience, a session of any early D&D system allows the players to get through many more combats and investigations than the same amount of gaming time would permit using any of the later versions of D&D.

Develop Your Abstract Combat Skills

One criticism that's often leveled against old-style gaming is that it's boring to just have a series of: "I roll a d20. Miss. I roll a d20. Hit. I roll a d20. Miss. I roll a d20. Miss." Except for very quick and unimportant combats, old-style combats aren't done like this, or it would indeed be boring. The reason old-style combat isn't boring – and in fact it's often much more colorful than modern-style combat – is because of things that aren't in the rules but are in the combats. In these games, a player can describe and attempt virtually anything he can think of. He doesn't need to have any sort of game-defined ability to do it. He can try to slide on the ground between opponents, swing from a chandelier and chop at a distant foe, taunt an opponent into running over a pit trap ... whatever he wants to try. That doesn't, of course, mean that he'll succeed. It's your job to handle these attempts colorfully and fairly, choosing whatever probability you think is the right one and rolling some dice.

Sometimes the answer is just, "there's no way that's going to work; I'm not even going to roll for it." When the players truly understand – and it may take a while – that they truly aren't constrained by abilities, feats, skills or rules, you'll find that combat becomes quite interesting.

It's also your job to inject events from outside the rules during combat. "You rolled a 1. Your sword goes flying." "You rolled a 1. You trip and fall." "You rolled a 1. Your sword sticks into a crack in the floor." "Hey, you rolled a 20. You spin around and gain an extra attack." Hey, you rolled a 20. You slay the orc, kick his body off your sword, and blood spatters into the eyes of one of the orcs behind him. He's not getting an attack this round." "Hey, you rolled a 20. You knock his sword out of his hand even though you didn't do enough damage to kill him." That's just a set of examples for the various ways you could handle natural rolls of 1 or 20. Each result is different, and none of them were official – you just made them up out of nowhere. You're being consistent – the high and low rolls always generate a good or bad result – but exactly what happens is pretty much a matter of you deciding what seems realistic, or really fun.

Also, flavorful combat isn't just in the naturally high and low rolls. A character leaps onto a table, but the table breaks. Swinging into combat on a rope succeeds – but the rope breaks and the character ends up swinging into the wrong group of monsters. A hit by a monster causes one of the characters to drop a torch. The feathered plume on someone's helmet is chopped off by a missed stroke. All these little details add to the quality of old-style combat, and change it dramatically from a sequence of d20 rolls into something far more alive and exciting. This doesn't mean, of course, that every swing of a sword blade and every step into combat must generate lavish descriptions and details from you. It's a matter of pacing, and frankly I can't explain how to do it well other than to say you'll get the hang of it.

Keep in mind, too, that it's not just the players who can use unorthodox tactics. Monsters do unexpected things, too – throwing a bench in the attempt to knock down two characters at once, monsters that try to swing by chandeliers, and other such challenges that don't often surface in games with tighter rules.

Finally, try to put some "toys" into the combat areas some of the time: benches, places where you can fight from the high ground, slippery patches, etc. Because of the speed of the abstract combat system, unusual tricks by the players and monsters don't cause delays while the rules are consulted. It's all you – you are the rulebook.

It's true that from time to time the "tape" of an old-style combat is exactly like this. Some combats are unimportant enough that no one bothers to try anything particularly unusual, and if there's not a fumble or a critical hit, and the party doesn't get into hot water then this kind of combat won't use much tactical thinking on anyone's part. So why even have it? Because every quick, less-significant combat uses up resources. And when I say quick, I mean very, very quick. In modern games, where combat contains special moves and lots of rules, combat takes up lots of time. An "insignificant" combat is a complete waste of gaming time. In older rules, a small combat can take five minutes or less. So small combats work very well as a way of depleting those precious resources in a race against time. The players will actually seek to avoid minor combats when there's not much treasure involved. They're looking for the lairs and the treasure troves, not seeking to kill everything that crosses their path. The classic old-style adventure contains "wandering monsters" that can randomly run into and attack the party, and some modern gamers see this as arbitrary. It's not. It's another instance of running a race against time – if the characters aren't smart and fast in getting to the lairs and troves, if they shilly-shally and wander, they're going to lose hit points and spells fighting wandering monsters who carry virtually no treasure. This is also, by the way, why older style games award experience points for gaining treasure as well as for killing monsters.

If killing monsters is the only way to gain experience points, then one monster's pretty much the same as another – the players don't have much of an incentive to avoid combat. When treasure is the best source of experience points and there's a race against time, the players have every incentive to use all their skill and creativity to avoid encounters that drain their resources. They've got to press on to the mission before they become too weak to keep going. So that's why combat is abstract, or at least it's one reason. Also, of course, fast combat mimics the pace of combat – in more complex games, players may have to sit for a while, contemplating the next "move" like a chess game. I've heard of egg timers being used to limit thinking time. With old-style, abstract combat, this just doesn't happen (not often, anyway). Abstract combat also opens the door for one of the things that's most important about old-style gaming – the freewheeling feel of "anything goes."

Way of the Donner Party

Old-style gaming has a strong component of what's often called "resource management." Spells get used up, hit points are lost, torches get used up, and food gets used up. This is another part of the game that's been minimized in later editions (particularly in 4th edition). The theory is that no one wants to spend time keeping track of mundane things like torches and food. And it's a good point – a poor referee can bollix this up if you spend too much time on it. However, one thing you have to realize about 0e: it is indeed a game where managing resources is at the game's very heart. In fact, I would have called this a fifth Zen moment of realization except that resource management is still a factor in later games – just to a lesser degree. Nevertheless, from the referee's standpoint you have to manage your game based on this premise: excitement and tension increase as the party is deeper and deeper into the danger zone and their resources are running low.

It takes artistry on your part: higher level adventures shouldn't be about declining food and light sources, they should be about declining hit points and spells. In lower-level adventures, food and light sources can be the key to success or failure of an expedition (remember, OD&D is about the little guy).

Here's the key point in terms of running the adventure, things to include so that resource management adds to the excitement instead of being a chore. First, you have to keep track of time in the dungeon so that you can quickly tell the players what resources to mark off their character sheets. If you lose track of game time, you lose quality in the game. Second, there has to be a meaningful choice for the players between pressing forward or retreating from the dungeon. Pressing forward with low resources is obviously risky, and there should be an incentive to keep going without just going back to memorize spells and heal up for a second try. These incentives and disincentives might include the following (1) high cost of living in an inn, (2) a reward from the local baron for completing a particular mission quickly (the reward declines per day), (3) a prisoner might be killed – and the kidnappers might even have given a deadline for this, (4) the way back has become blocked by a monster, trap, or portcullis, and another way out must be found, (5) the party is lost due to a teleportation trap or bad mapping, (6) the treasure the party seeks is being destroyed or consumed with time, (7) the party has been told not to come back out until some mission is finished – always a good trick when the party has legal troubles, (8) a wager or other social situation means that the party will lose money or be generally ridiculed if they return without a certain amount of treasure, or (9) the party has to pay a fee each time they enter the dungeon. I'm sure you can think of more.

In some way, the adventure needs to be a race against time, even if the pressure isn't necessarily all that high (cost of living, for example, is a very low-pressure race against time, and rescuing a hostage is very high-pressure).

At higher levels, creating the race against time requires a bit more creativity on your part – especially because you don't want to make it into something that forces the players into any particular adventure. The players should generally have a choice about where they go and what sorts of adventures they want to risk, so you've got to avoid over-using the whole "the king will have you executed if you don't rescue the princess" sort of adventure hook. It's okay sometimes, because running away from the king's guards is also a legitimate choice for the adventurers, but never eliminate that choice.

Final reminders:

You are the rulebook. There is no other rulebook.

Make it fast, make it colorful, and make it full of decisions for the players.

How to Get Started

Step 1: Read the Zen moments. If they don't create a sudden mental "click," skim through them again after reading the rules of the old school game you're going to play. Actually seeing the rules may make it easier to get the "click."

Step 2: Download a copy of Swords & Wizardry Complete Revised (from mythmergames.com), or use any old-school set of rules, such as Original D&D or the 1981 Moldvay Basic/Expert rules. Swords & Wizardry presents the Original D&D rules a bit more clearly for a modern reader, so you might want to use Swords & Wizardry as a "bridge" edition for seeing the original rules all in one place and presented in a familiar format. Then, once you've got a basic understanding of how an old school game plays, there are many to choose from.

Step 3: Read the rules as if they're for a completely new game written last week by a respected game-publishing company. Especially if you're looking at the Original D&D rules, you'll find the information to be "scattered" in a bizarre way, but it shouldn't be a problem – they're only scattered across a few pages.

Step 4: Decide on an adventure to run. Legacy of Blackscale Lagoon by James Spahn is one you can get from mythmergames.com.

Step 5: Get familiar with the adventure by reading it through before the gaming session.

Step 6: Run the adventure, and enjoy!

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SWORDS & WIZARDRY BOOK OF OPTIONS

The Book of Options is a supplement for the Swords & Wizardry Complete Rulebook. It offers 11 new character classes, two new ancestries (Gnomes and Stygians), new spells, new magic items, a revised copy of the Quick Primer for Old School Gaming, encounter tables that include the monsters from Fiends and Foes, and much more!

New character classes include:

- The Barbarian, a non-rage-based fighter with wilderness skills and keen senses
- The Bard, loosely based on the Celtic bard
- The Chivalric knight, basically a cavalier for those familiar with older versions of D&D
- The Demon Hunter, a spell-caster with unusual abilities
- The Dwarven Priest, a dwarven cleric-like class
- The Elfblade, essentially a fighter/magic-user
- The Illusionist, casting spells that affect the eye and mind
- The Necromancer, casting spells of death and control
- The Troubadour, an illusionist-thief archetype
- The Warlock, whose spells stem from non-divine powers
- The Wrath-Chanter, a rage-based barbarian class

Everything in this book is optional, but it is a phenomenal resource for Referees and Players who want to expand the horizons of a Swords & Wizardry game!