

Primer for Old School D&D

With so few definite "rules" in the game, OD&D relies heavily on Rule Zero: the DM has the final say in rulings at the table.

This requires a lot of trust. The players have to trust that the DM isn't "cheating" or trying to kill the PCs on purpose.

To foster this trust, I will try to be up front with My House Rules, clear about potential consequences of certain actions (and not play "Gotcha!" with traps, etc.), and roll my dice in the open, so you can see I'm not fudging.

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General playing style

Below are some of the aspect of the DM Philosophy I will be attempting to follow.

Rulings, not Rules

There aren't many rules, so much of the time, I will make a ruling at the table, based on how you describe your action. I will try to be clear about what the potential consequences are, not try to "trick" you into doing something that will get your character killed.

Decision, not Dice

Wherever possible, I will try to resolve actions without rolling dice at all. For example, if

you think there's a trap, and you examine the exact place where the trap is, you will probably find the trap without having to roll. Similarly, if you describe your attempt to disarm the trap, and it sounds to me like it would work, it will probably work. Ideally, I'd like to save most of the dice rolls as a last-ditch attempt to get you out of a tight spot.

No Skills

One thing we definitely won't be rolling dice for are Skill Checks, because there aren't any. Wanna check for traps? Tell me where you're looking and I'll tell you what you see. If a detail sounds "iffy", ask about it. I'll give you more information. Eventually you'll decide whether or not it seems dangerous or not, and live (or die) by your choices.

Is the NPC lying to you? You have to decide that for yourself. There's no Insight or Sense Motive check. It's really up to you if you trust them or not.

There are no balanced encounters

One Old School Gamer wrote "If I'm walking in the woods and I meet a bear, is Nature going to 'balance the encounter' for me? Hell no. I need to run." And while outrunning a bear isn't really a thing you can do in real life, the point is well taken: Old School D&D does not have the concept of Encounter Balance. It just doesn't exist. No matter what level you are, you can never assume an encounter is "winnable". Always be ready to run, or sneak away. Always look to press whatever advantage you can. Despite what the Jedi think, ranged attacks are tactically superior to melee attacks.

And remember: there's a reason a sack of ball bearings appears on the Equipment List of every single edition of the game.

Heroic (sort of), but not Superheroes

Old School D&D doesn't create Superheroes. Matt Finch, who wrote *Swords & Wizardry*, suggested a high-level OD&D character is more like Batman than Superman. Batman can do a lot of things ordinary people can't, and he certainly has a lot of cool gear, but he's still human, and thus still mortal.

Further than that, Old School D&D was a far less Heroic game than it has become. The core assumption was basically mercenary: PCs went on adventures to get treasure. End of story. If they did some good by killing a few bad monsters, that was a pleasant side-effect. But the main thing was treasure.

If you find it hard to be motivated by mercenary goals, and want to be more a traditional Good Guy, that's totally fine. But also remember what your personal development goals are. Would you like a magic sword, for example? Or do you want to discover more powerful spells? Do you have a grudge against a particular kind of monster? PC goals are

the driving force of Old School D&D, and they traditionally have more to do with "What kind of cool stuff can I get and/or do?" than "How can I make the fictional game world a better place?"

Information is your most valuable resource

OD&D, and my ideal DMing style, attempts to reward players for making good decisions. However, you can't make good decisions without information.

Consider this scenario. There are three rooms. You know one room has the Treasure you're looking for. One room has nothing but flavour text. And one room has a deadly Ogre Encounter. Unless you have some clues, some way of gathering information about what differentiates the three rooms, you can't make an informed choice. So if you choose the Ogre room and die, you are "punished" for random chance, and the same goes for your "reward" if you choose the Treasure room and escape without a fight.

This means it's my job to give you hints and clues and make the essential information available to you, so you can make informed choices. It means I won't be coy about describing trapped areas or monster lairs.

It also means there are no stupid questions, and you should ask as many questions as you please. The more you ask, the more you learn. The more you learn, the better equipped you'll be to get through a dangerous area, loot intact, with your in-game lives.

Knowledge is power, and that power beats a +1 sword any day of the week.

(Earned) Success and Failure

OD&D is more firmly a game than a story. This means the game is designed to provide a challenge to the players. It is not "balanced" to give the characters a fair chance of survival.

This doesn't mean I want you to fail. On the contrary, I want you to succeed. But I want you to succeed because you actually succeeded, not because I let you.

Failing is fun

The best Old School D&D stories are not about the time you defeated a Big Bad Guy without taking any damage. They're about the time you all hatched a terrible plan, everything about it went wrong, and it was an unmitigated, but wildly entertaining, disaster.

How My Character Died is probably the best kind of Old School D&D story. By contrast,

How My Character Reached Level 20 and Lived Happily Ever After is a pretty boring story.

So try crazy things, embrace Plan B, and take a failed dice roll as a opportunity to go out in a blaze of glory. There's always another character waiting to be rolled up.

Leaving the dungeon is a thing

There are no Short Rests where you can spend a hit die to heal yourself up in OD&D, so if you're low on hit points, arrows, torches, spells, water, rations, or anything else you need to stay alive, it's time to head back to town.

Yes, the dungeon might "restock" while you're away, so you'll have to be careful returning to areas you've "cleared", but that's better than dying unceremoniously in the bowels of the earth.

Specific to my game

As this is an experiment - one that may not succeed - I haven't yet decided whether to include this game in my homebrew world.

But whether I do or not, there are some aspects of my approach to the game that are important.

You can break my setting

My homebrew setting, and any setting I run, basically exists so we can play D&D. This doesn't mean I don't care about the setting. It's just that I care about Player Agency more.

I want your decisions to be meaningful, and to have an impact on how the world develops. Once you enter my world, it becomes your world too. And your choices are more important than any story I could try to foist on you.

The Invention Test

For me, D&D works best when the players have meaningful choices to make. I'm not into writing a long campaign and expecting you to play through it "my way".

Instead, I would rather run the game like the Invention Test in Masterchef. There's a sandbox full of "ingredients", any of which could make an excellent game. It's up to you to choose which ones you want to use.

This means your choices and goals, not my stories, are the driving force in the game. At

first, we'll have to start small.

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