

Why Designer Notes?

It's not that I think I have something so profound to say that I simply have to get it down on paper. Rather, the OSR community is one of tinkerers; we have far more game designers than any other RPG community I can think of. Along these lines, many OSR communities feature threads such as "what is the difference between OSR game X and original ruleset Y" and "why the hell did they do that?" This commentary aims to preempt those sorts of questions, for the benefit of the tinkerers out there and the better to allow you to accept or reject my efforts.

The TL;DR

Even writing for obsessive methodical sorts like myself, I know the basic question when looking at the latest OSR game is "so just what does it do differently"? So, in brief:

Primary Aim

To provide a complete game that can capture both the feel of the classics of bold heroic fantasy and the comparatively methodical, risk-averse style of play of the OSR, specifically aiming for 4-5 player groups.

Broader Goals

- 1) Complete: has a bestiary and magic items. Can be played as-is without need of supplements.
- 2) Compatibility with the original old-school editions and classic OSR rulesets derived from them.
- 3) Stronger PCs: specifically to allow for groups of 4-5 players when playing classic modules, instead of the 6-10 those typically assume.
- 4) Creating a more flexible character creation process, to allow for PCs that better represent the fiction that classic OSR rulesets are based on, while not raising complexity or adding a tendency towards "builds".
- 5) Reduced complexity when possible (e.g. weapon and armour types, spell descriptions, equipment lists, race abilities), but with a mind to ensuring that old-school play elements aren't lost as a result. "Rules-light" is not a goal in and of itself.
- 6) Added complexity where it was felt the reward was worth it. In particular, adding slight combat complexity without requiring a tactical map, heavily increasing fight times, or creating analysis paralysis.
- 7) Use of select modern design elements, but with adjustments to avoid compromising old-school play.
- 8) Setting neutrality: no implied world beyond a basic fantasy medievalism, to maximize compatibility.
- 9) Layout with an emphasis on ease of use.
- 10) Writing with an emphasis on being brief and clear.

Major Components

The game is not a precise clone of any one specific version of the classic fantasy game. It freely draws on whatever I felt was best to do whatever job I wanted to do, within the guidelines laid out above. Notable elements are as follows:

- Classes: synthesis of all classes into just two – the Warrior and the Mage. No multi/dual-classing. Single (unified) XP table. Thief abilities are largely everyman abilities.
- Custom hexcrawl mechanics emphasizing ease of use over survivalism/complexity.
- Magic: all spells collapsed down to six spell levels. No arcane/divine split: all spell types (cleric, wizard, illusionist) folded into eight schools and accessible by any spellcaster. Only up to half of the schools accessible at first level, to make each caster different. School access can be traded away for other benefits. Magic accessible by the warrior in very limited amounts.
- Alignment: nine-point (Neutrality axed, Unaligned added).
- Races: de-emphasis on race as part of emphasis on setting neutrality (races have no mechanical features and thus no level limits).
- Race and Class separate.
- Hit Dice: both classes use D8. Characters start off with 1D8+8 hit points, but gain as normal from there. Monsters and NPCs use D6 for Hit Dice.
- Ascending Armour Class.
- Combat: provided a handful of new options to PC combatants; all weapons reduced to three sizes / tiers of damage. Only three types of armour. Simple critical hits; no critical fumbles.
- Spells heavily rewritten to reduce to about a paragraph apiece and to standardize areas of effect and other such basic mechanics. Some of the most world/adventure breaking spells removed (ranging from *Permanency* to *Continual Light* to *Wish*).
- Feats: used to unlock class-like abilities.
- DC-like system handles both the single saving throw and general tasks, with adjustments to avoid 3rd edition-style problems with such systems.
- Silver standard, and 1 cp = 1 XP (treasure amounts reduced accordingly).
- Skills: largely non-mechanical, optional.

The justifications for all these items are laid out as this document progresses, but I'll examine some of the above broader goals first.

Stronger PCs?

Are more starting hit points (plus other bonuses) for player characters an abandonment of the OSR principle of deadly combats and the trademark careful planning that goes with it? Not necessarily. I had a couple of goals with this approach.

The first was to allow for the maximum amount of playstyle flexibility. Higher starting values allows for bolder, more heroic roleplaying early on, if that's desired (and without skewing the later game; an extra hit die at the start means double the hit points, but proportionally matters less and less as higher levels are reached and more HP gained). It also allows for more variety in starting encounters.

The second is to allow for smaller playgroups. Many older modules have suggested playgroups that are quite large (e.g. *Against the Giants* states that "The optimum mix ... is 9 characters"; A1 was suggested for 6-8 players; B2 for 6-9 players; B4 was for 6-10 players; D1-2 and I2 were for 7-9 players; S3 was for 10-15(!) players, S4 was for 6-8 players; U1 was for 5-10 players; X1 was for 6-10 players). N1 was unusual in having a recommended floor of 4 players, but still had a high end of 7. Plain and simple, old-school editions were not designed to be played with modern small parties. Old-school play is indeed more dangerous than modern, but some of the supposed lethality comes from playing classic adventures with far fewer characters than they were originally designed for.

Even though a *Simulacrum* party is a smaller one, for those who want the original old-school experience where PCs are notably weaker, it's simple to increase the power and/or number of monsters or the damage dealt by traps to compensate for the higher PC values. By increasing the damage of traps, or replacing goblins in an encounter with orcs or hobgoblins, etc, one can easily achieve with *Simulacrum* the Fantasy Vietnam vibe normally present for OSR 1st-level characters; in this case, the increased values for PCs can be simply negated by slightly more powerful opposition, without greatly affecting the time required to play out a given encounter. At the same time, the fear of being killed by a housecat is no longer present, an incidental artifact of design that produces occasionally funny stories (usually in hindsight), but is indefensible from a realism perspective. You can have it either way.

In short, higher starting values gives more scope to heroic playing if desired for the small parties intended here, are easily counter-balanced if not, and allows you to obviate some of the more obnoxious "you stubbed your toe and died" sort of adventuring unless that's specifically desired.

Added Complexity?

As I mention above, I was looking to add complexity (or at least detail) if that was useful. One of the few fruitful areas still remaining for clones was in expanding the base game in useful (i.e. non-crufty) ways. As such, I've placed an emphasis on detailing and exploring the foundational elements of OSR play that yet are often passed over even in the original games, and doubly so in numerous hacks and ultralights. How fast can a PC climb, and at what point do they fall if they fall? How do they swim, sneak, dig, or jump? How far does light travel in a dungeon? Why are the standard wilderness exploration, hunting, grappling, falling and combat retreat mechanics often so bad? How exactly does exploration movement work? I've worked to avoid third-edition "bad physics simulator"-type solutions, as well as *Dungeoneer/Wilderness Survival Guide*-type explorations where the player drowns in detail to the point that the rules are unusable, but at the same time to give firm guidelines for these foundational gameplay elements that are usable at the tabletop. GMs are expected to shoulder a greater burden in old-school play in terms of ruling on the fly, but I see no reason why that should extend to the basics.

Modern Design Elements?

A fairly common feature of OSR rulesets are attempts to update the underlying game engine by incorporating modern design elements such as skill systems, perception checks, ability score checks, feats, universal task resolution, advantage/disadvantage, and so on. There's a desire to work with a dungeon-crawl core, but using mechanics familiar to modern players.

The appeal of these mechanics is clear: they tend to be quick and easy to use compared to old-school original methods of handling the same. The problem is that many of these mechanics are part and parcel of the evolution away from old-school play, at least as they're typically utilized. OSR games that use them tend to simply add them in as-is, with the designer being unaware of their points of failure or believing that complaints about their effect on old-school play are overstated. As such, the mechanics have acquired a bad reputation in some OSR circles, seen as inescapably tied to the later non-old-school editions that used them so prominently.

I see the appeal of *some* of these mechanics, and came to the conclusion that they're not all inherently bad, but that their standard implementation often is. For example, perception is a terrible ability when written as a player-facing mechanic that replaces all investigation with constantly called-for die rolls, which is how most people know it. However, if locked in the GM's hands, it simply

provides a standardized and intuitive approach to the common scenarios of looking for traps and secret doors. Similarly, feats at their core are simply “a thing that you can do”: while awful in their original implementation—dozens upon dozens of options, frequently intertwined and often required in order to do the most basic of things—there’s no innate need to handle them that way, and the idea of being able to pick from a handful of unentwined options is not inherently broken.

I’ve picked my way through the most common modern mechanics. In some cases I’ve tried to mitigate the mechanical reasons why these things were troublesome from an old-school perspective (which I go over in more detail in the relevant sections below), while in other cases I rely on my own GMing experience and philosophy to keep things straight. And there’s some mechanics I deemed unsalvageable (ability score checks in particular). But in all cases, elements were deliberately chosen and tweaked to fit, rather than just added whole cloth in the name of “streamlining” and “modern design”, and I keep a fair amount of material that some might consider cruft (like item saving throws, encumbrance, etc) because I think old-school editions are actually a lot of fun and I like what they have to offer. I’m making this game because I feel like it, rather than because I think 1st edition is a bad game (it’s great, actually).

Quick Notes on Rolling

While the dice used vary, all rolls in the game are roll-high to succeed. This necessitated a couple of awkward moments where I had to make stats where low = good (so that rolling above them means you get the good result). I named these incidences “thresholds” rather than scores or so on to help clue the reader that they’re different than normal (death threshold and morale threshold). It was either make roll-high = good and thus low score = good, or make it so that high score = good but then roll-low also = good, which is confusing in its own way; if you can’t have it clean, you might as well have it consistent at least.

I’ve avoided implementing the popular advantage/disadvantage mechanic, as I find it a clumsy solution: one-dimensional and lacking in granularity. For a more mathematical look at this subject, [see here](#).

In general, while I’ve generally aimed to streamline roll types (e.g. the D20-based Task system, or how the vast majority of spell mechanics use D6), I’ve gone with what I felt to be the right die for the job, instead of trying to make everything one die type regardless of how well it fits.

CHAPTER I (p. 3)

Name Levels (p. 3)

Subtly wedged into the basic terminology section is the introduction of the name level concept. It’s rather foundational and so repeated later, but I’ll cover it here.

In older rulesets, “name level” was simply 9th level: it meant that you had suddenly transitioned to bigwig status, and gain a variety of more worldshaking powers and attendant responsibilities. I’ve decided to adopt the terminology and general concept—“this is a big deal; you’re a somebody now”—but not the rest. Part of this is that I’m not so interested in late-game realm-based play that I felt I could bring anything to it that *ACKS* or Kevin Crawford’s *An Echo, Resounding* didn’t already provide. But the main reason is that wasn’t what I was after.

Instead, I saw value in the concept of general power levels readily marked with clear boundaries. By parceling out key abilities at a set rate, it becomes easier to gauge the relative power levels of PCs. OSR games are less concerned about balance than most more modern efforts, but it would be foolish to claim they don’t care about it at all: even the earliest modules had “for X PCs of Y level”, and weren’t throwing liches at level 1 characters. With this power distribution scheme, with its emphasis on larger bonuses being granted every fifth level, I feel I can more readily make adventures and other mechanics built around being for character levels 1-4, 5-9, 10-14, 15-19, and so on. It’s a modern concept, but one I feel that has value.

At the same time, improvements don’t only appear at these levels. HP, attack bonuses, and spell slots increase at more typical level-by-level rates.

Campaign Matters (p. 4)

“Anything in this booklet ... should be thought of as changeable.... The purpose of these ‘rules’ is to provide guidelines that enable you to play and have fun, so don’t feel absolutely bound to them.”

Rule 0, as the above is often called, is a handy rule and a good one, enshrined in games inspiring the OSR from very early on. However, when you sit down and stare at several thousand words worth of rules, it can also become an imposing one. Just what should be changed? How? And what are the knock-on effects? The Rule 0 Fallacy (responding to any charge of X being broken with “it’s not, because you can always houserule it”) is a fallacy for a reason.

To help with this, I've added "Campaign Matter" notes. These indicate those rules items that more often call for GM decisions to be made before the game, whether because they're more innately flexible than some rules or simply because they are more often house ruled than others. In such cases, as I say in the Introduction, I figured I'd just list the common ways or common exceptions and save us all the trouble, rather than stating my preference and pretending everyone will follow it. Additionally, the act of setting down what I considered flexible mechanics versus what I thought must be etched in stone helped define for me exactly what I wanted *Simulacrum* to be.

A checklist at the back of the *GM's Manual* allows a GM to quickly review a campaign's fundamentals before it begins, so that players and the GM are on the same page.

How Does *Simulacrum* Play? (p. 4)

A great deal of what makes OSR play is in the approach, rather than the rules. The rules clearly matter—you can't have old-school play without a certain core of old-school rules—but, as I've argued elsewhere, it was under 1st edition and Basic that the transformation into plot railroads and heroic play took place, not 2nd ed.

As such, I felt it was important to add things like this to the player's book as well as the GM's book. Players and GMs alike need to be prepped to understand just how an OSR game should play out, because they won't divine it just by reading the rulebook, no matter how clear the rules are by themselves. This covers the essentials.

CHAPTER II (p. 5)

Ability Scores (p. 5)

The physical ability scores I felt did not need much tinkering. I removed the Initiative modifier for Dex because of the use of group initiative. I removed the to-hit bonus aspects from Strength and Dexterity (melee and ranged) because I only wanted each stat to affect one thing in combat. This does have the side effect that mages with high Str (a rare breed) aren't more accurate in melee combat, but I don't feel that that's a major loss; they still hit harder.

The more abstract ability scores—Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma—I was less happy with.

My main issue was that I disliked that all mages must be smart and all clerics wise. I wanted the ability to have foolish wielders of great power without having to fight the system; stating that "well, it's called Wisdom, but it's not really about being wise" is painfully counterintuitive. I also wanted to allow wielders of magic to have a greater variety of backgrounds, such a non-genius (or even an outright

idiot) with arcane power. One of the great staples of fantasy and weird fiction is the greedy idiot bargaining with fell powers. Now you can have a character who is weak-willed, unwise, not too bright, and still loaded to the gills with (probably borrowed) power.

Overall, removing magic from the mental stats allows a better emulation of genre fiction tropes, and more flexibility in world-building. In terms of magic, the Arcana score replaces these two stats.

Charisma: This is widely considered a dump stat (though this says to me that such people didn't use the Reaction Table, let alone hirelings). My main annoyance with it is that it proposes a definition of charisma that is not just cross-alignment, but also cross-cultural and cross-species ("why yes, the sahuagin death priest thinks you're particularly suave"). The basic game and its relatives have always shied away from mechanically determining social abilities in general, except in this one odd case. It felt better to me to just remove it, rather than bolt on social skills and follow the path further. With its removal, you're now as charismatic as you roleplay yourself as being, and you can't largely rely on a stat to keep your hirelings in line.

Perception: The broad concept of Perception is already used in the basic game in a few embryonic fashions, like noticing secret doors. It's a universal aspect, but does not improve over time: perfect stat material. Perception as a stat allows us to wrap up those elements and more in a single stat. However, Perception checks are only ever made by the GM, never the player. The noxious idea of players wandering around calling out Perception / Spot checks all day instead of actually performing some kind of considered investigation is one of the key elements the OSR looks to avoid. Keeping the mechanic entirely in GM hands nips that behaviour in the bud.

Willpower: For non-magical purposes, Willpower replaces Wisdom, but it's pretty much just a palette swap: any mention of Wisdom can refer to Willpower if desired. In game terms, Willpower is a lesser stat, also matching Wisdom in many ways. However, the entire Enchantment school of magic, with such key spells as *Sleep* and *Charm Person*, uses Will-based saving throws, making the strong willed more able to resist, and the weak-willed essentially enchanter bait. Any Will modifier is also applied to a character's death checks.

Arcana: Doesn't the creation of this create, for non-spellcasters, a dump stat worse than Charisma ever was? I would be okay with that, as non-spellcasters already had Intelligence to ignore, and Wisdom wasn't all that important either. However, Arc does provide a save bonus vs. virtually all magic direct damage, as almost all such spells have Arc-based saves (this helps recreate the fact

that wizards always had the better save vs. spells; Mages with a high Arc score—a likely occurrence—will have similar resistances).

Prime Requisites: There is no such rule (bonus XP earned for having a high score in a class's "primary" ability). Anyone who's rolled really high hardly needs a reward for doing so: the fact of having a high stat is fortune enough. Such a rule only encourages cheating while adding math—the worst kind of rule.

Stat Conversion: I didn't add a version of the rule allowing you to freely convert points of one attribute to another, because crippling your less useful attributes through largescale conversion so as to improve your best stats promotes character homogeneity and is a cornerstone of the min-max mindset. I'm trying to avoid a heavy focus on stats. The closest equivalent here is the option to allow you to change one or two points, for one stat, once.

However, as Arcana is generally a preferred stat for mages (though not required), a hard rule has been added to allow a player to outright switch around one stat with another, despite the general emphasis on letting GMs decide how stats are determined otherwise.

Class Qualifiers: I've tossed any ability score requirements for classes. If you think the weak and stupid shouldn't be warriors because they'd be bad it, I'd broadly agree, but also note that sometimes circumstance or simple unwise desire prompts those who have no business being a warrior to become one anyways, and that natural selection already provides a thinning-out effect.

Modifiers: I wanted to avoid racial modifiers in the interests of setting neutrality. I also don't like how they tend to be a min-max element rather than a roleplaying consideration (and with only two classes that's even more of a concern). As a small formatting issue, keeping ability score modifiers here allows me to have all score-related material on the same page.

In terms of the scale of stat modifiers and how important they should be, I felt the original 1974 edition made them too unimportant, while B/X and especially 1st edition made them too good. As such, I went for a middle ground. While I use the B/X stat modifier scale, each stat only affects one gameplay item (I especially wanted to avoid the common tendency to make Dexterity the god stat). They have no effect on which class you can take, and very few gating effects on other gameplay (you need average Str to use a longbow or heavy armour; that's about it). They also don't add more XP. Overall, high stats are nice to have, but you don't **need** them to do or be anything. I'm happy with the resulting compromise.

Classes (pp. 6-7)

As mentioned at the start, the main goal with classes was to better capture the feel of the classics of heroic fantasy within a stripped-down framework. Essentially, that meant I wanted to have my cake and eat it too: I wanted a more simplified, elegant approach to character classes, and yet I wanted to be able to do more than the standard class structure typically allows. To that end, I felt character creation had to be totally overhauled.

The "stripped-down" part was important to me here. Many OSR games like to expand the available class list, sometimes massively. Options—any options—are a give-and-take phenomenon, in that they provide increased choice, but at the cost of increased character creation time and increased balance difficulties. The page count bloats, new players have to wade through the entire list to see what they want to do, and having too many classes creates "tiers" of obviously more or less powerful classes.

At the same time, there was a desire for greater flexibility, so that one could more readily make a character reflecting the abilities of such legends as Fafhrd, Conan, Elric, Kane, or the Grey Mouser—characters who never fit the strict pigeonholes of class as it is usually handled. But I still wanted to avoid "builds" and character optimization.

So, to start with I felt we needed to strip things down to the elemental basics: the wizard and the warrior.¹ What is a cleric, but a mage with a specific background, an arbitrarily divided spell list, and improved combat ability? What is a thief, but a fighter with a tendency to kleptomania? Aren't paladins just fighters with minor spell access? Are ranger and barbarian classes, or just societal backgrounds?

More important than any of this philosophical wankery is: *how many times do we see the fiction that so inspired classic edition not fitting into the class concepts provided by those editions?* Conan is a barbarian, but also a thief, but also a leader of men. The Grey Mouser is a fighter, a thief, and a mage. Elric is a fighter and mage. I felt this should be baked right into character creation, but in a way that lets you get what you want without breaking the game or requiring clumsy mechanics like dual or multi-classing.

¹ This is something Dave Arneson tried in 1979, with *Adventures in Fantasy*, though his approach otherwise was quite different.

One could easily argue that I didn't go far enough, and that the real elemental root of class is "the adventurer", with the focus on magic or not being just one mechanical element of that class. I felt that was too much, reaching past the point of simplification and into blandness. Also, if you're going to use a class structure in a game, you should have at least two or it sort of misses the point.

As such, warriors can trade away a bit of their melee ability to gain a bit of magery, and mages can do the reverse. Thieving can be added to either, as can ranger-like tracking, monk-like fighting, and holy-warrior blessings. None of these are as elaborate as their 1st-edition equivalents, but that was fine to me: I wanted the general sense of flavour and a hint of mechanics to back this up, rather than full-on emulation of every little mechanical benefit the complete class write-ups give.

Both classes use the same XP advancement table. With them being much closer in terms of power to each other, I wanted to take the opportunity to streamline (as I did whenever possible, so long as it didn't compromise core principles, which careless streamlining so often does).

Lastly, both classes can choose feats. For the most part they are just what are often thought of as class features: ranger-like abilities, lockpicking, martial arts training, metamagic, and so on. I largely use the concept as a way of replacing the need for more classes.

The Warrior (p. 6)

The main goal here was to increase combat and character-type options without bogging things down by piling on the crunch.

Each of the three (mutually exclusive) warrior styles are clearly more powerful than the comparatively weaker feats. Were any of these to be feats, it is very likely that all three would eventually be taken. By setting them as core styles that can't be taken after character creation, each warrior will play fundamentally different from the other two base types, and each will be capable of filling gameplay / battlefield niches that no other character can (utility via magic, melee crowd control, and melee vs. larger foes). At the same time, the choice of any of these does not penalize a character: it just emphasizes certain strengths.

Overall, warriors here take after the 1st-edition fighter than the B/X equivalent, the latter being notably weaker.

Arcanist: Warriors can start the game with access to two schools of magic (though they have half the spells per day of a true mage), which easily allows the creation of paladins and the like. I've tried to make them not just bad spellcasters, by allowing them to cast while on horseback and in any armour, which mages cannot do unless they work at it (battlemage allows light armour, and the Concentration feat allows horseback casting, but these are meaningful investments). This should result in the two playing out rather differently.

Hordeslayer: Call it sweep or cleave or whatever, Hordeslayer is the classic mass-murder ability for fighters. This version follows the ACKS line of scaling it up as the

warrior progresses in level, rather than limiting to 1 HD or sub-1 HD critters only.

The Mage (p. 7)

This folds clerics and wizards together into one big happy family.

All spells in the game have been combined into the classic eight-school system. Mages start with access to a max of four of the eight schools. They can trade away access to one school to gain better melee combat abilities: light armour usage and an attack progression matching that of the warrior. This allows you to better make battlemages (such as the traditional cleric), while still allowing the classic robed "arcane master" archetype, and to have an actual reason for the latter to exist. Spells have been rebalanced and specifically packaged into the schools so that each school offers something meaningful (covered in the *Magic* section). Specialization exists, allowing you to be a dedicated necromancer or what have you; again, this costs you access to a school.

A 20th-level mage that never traded away any school access would have access to all 8 schools. Restricted school access as a whole helps prevent cookie-cutter mages, especially when combined with the battlemage option, the few mage feats, and random spell access. Now there's more to differentiate mages besides whatever magic spells and items they randomly receive, without needing to go down the road of buckets of feats, kits, or prestige classes. Overall, the result is that every mage plays quite differently.

Mages, like warriors, can gain access to classic thieving abilities via skills (or a feat).

Races (p. 8)

Towards my goal of setting neutrality, I've not bothered to include any detail on races (including no mechanical benefits from taking one). Whether elves are arcane nature-loving hippies or degenerate flesh-eating savages is up to the GM, who will presumably assign any racial mechanics to match.

I'm not going to make any broad claims of balancing, genre emulation and the like here: I just think gnomes are at best a giant pile of meh, so I replaced them with things I thought were more compelling. The end. Of course, it's very easy to insert them (or any other race) into this game, so it's not really a big deal, because no detail on races means that this ruleset doesn't care what races you're using. The "default" races listed are a variety ranging from first to third edition.

The biggest change made to races is the removal of level limits. This is already a common house rule, to the point that it eventually became official. As an arbitrary set

of mechanics, it needs a strong justification to stick around; we're going rules-light whenever possible. Gygax's justification for level limits was that it was impossible to imagine a world in which demihumans had not taken over the world without them. However, that completely ignores racial, cultural, and environmental factors, such as an in-world disaster, low birth rates, a tendency towards short-sighted thinking, or a lack of curiosity or drive holding a race back from technological development and/or expansion, none of which are reflected in a level limit rule (or even ability score adjustments). Such a worldbuilding approach is also not setting-neutral: it assumes you want a human-dominated world in the first place, which might not be true.

Overall, if you want to add racial level limits, it's easy to do, but I'd prefer to cut cruft whenever possible; demihuman ascendancy is better treated as a matter of worldbuilding than of mechanical balance.

Alignment (p. 8)

Law and Chaos, Good and Evil: these are textbook fantasy elements, and tied into the rules mechanically in numerous places. My fundamental problem with alignment is that in the Elric stories it represented an allegiance to cosmic forces, not an attitude to life in general. When people try to apply the system to everyday moral and ethical situations, it's no wonder it falls down. Reworking it so that it's a wider worldbuilding tool—a sign of your pledge to a greater power and its cause—rather than a determination of how far you'll go to help an old lady halfling cross the street makes alignment useful instead of a hindrance.

Neutrality is absent from this system, especially True Neutral. The concept of a cosmic balance made perfect sense in the world of Elric, but is bizarre in worlds not featuring that sort of cosmology (not to mention the troubles caused by that license-to-be-a-mouthbreather alignment known as Chaotic Neutral). Replacing Neutrality with Unaligned allows those who feel their roleplaying is shackled by alignments to avoid them, and also prevents everything from being elementally good, evil, lawful, or chaotic. It also still allows for the concept of innately good or evil races, while allowing others to have greater elements of free will.

Hit Points (p. 8)

In the original rules everything used D6 for their Hit Dice regardless of class; I've just raised the PC average slightly. Everyone having the same Hit Point scale makes things much easier to track and calculate opposition for. From a character conception standpoint, there's also no reason

why mages should be reedy, needy frails. We see plenty of capable magic users in fiction.

Allowing PCs to start with 1D8+8 HP is a very deliberate choice. People can of course ignore that anyways, but this is something I felt strongly about enough to (attempt to) bake into the base rules. If you've only got 4 players, you need twice the Hit Points to make up for a module that assumes 8 players, and even then, you're going to start falling behind after level 1 (since you don't get 2 HD per level, and have fewer attacks). The idea is to allow smaller groups and a bit more boldness at the start of play, but not to allow one to ignore danger altogether. By no means does this make PCs inhuman killing machines.

Along these lines, towards the end of his life [Gygax started new characters off at 3rd level](#) if their party was understrength (i.e. 5 players), creating a similar effect.

Feats (pp. 9-10)

I've tried to avoid the greatest faults of many previous feat implementations:

- ❖ Feat bloat and power creep. Each feat has been as carefully considered as any of the spells; they are all in one place and of limited amount. They're mostly intended to allow the creation of core character concepts by being added to the base two classes (i.e. modular character creation) rather than a means of stapling cool powers to a character.
- ❖ Progression mapping. Feats here never require earlier feats. As such, there's no requirement to map out your character's progression to ensure you take the right feats at the right time. This keeps character creation quick while at the same time allowing you to take abilities that reflect your character's growth in play, rather than having the rules tell you that you **will** be learning archery at 6th level because you need it for something else, whether it fits your preferences and play to date or not.
- ❖ There's no feat permitting you to wear armour, trip someone, make use of objects / the environment around you to better attack your enemy, or anything else that "allows" you to do something any character should be able to do as a given. A ruleset (especially an OSR one) should leave room for realistic improvisation, rather than restricting it in the name of attempting to codify every possible action.

Individual feat notes:

Read Scrolls: Creates the old-school high-level thief effect.

Metamagic: Improving damage or area of effect were deliberately excluded as possibilities.

Fieldcraft: Allows rangers.

Lockpicking: Unlike the skill version, this also lowers the difficulty of detecting traps on locks, and comes with free tools. A feat slot is a much bigger investment than a skill slot, and so should provide a greater reward.

Martial Artist: Allows monks. The ability to damage creatures normally only hit by magical weapons was added because otherwise martial artists become increasingly weaker in melee as the levels climb. The ability to pick two stances is for a similar reason: as time goes by, weapon wielders start getting magical weapons, with extra properties, which martial artists can't match. The extra stance gives them some unique flexibility as compensation.

Skills (pp. 11-12)

Similar to feats, skills put many OSR players' backs up. I think it's a usable idea though, and so I've tried to avoid the greatest faults of many previous implementations.

First and foremost is that the system is optional; the rules largely ignore its existence. Secondly, even within the optional system, social skills are banned. You only get two skills, and one more every five levels, so they will never even come close to being the end-all and be-all of a character (which in turn leads to players checking their sheets rather than trying to actually think of a way to resolve something). Lastly, there's no ranks or mandated scales or types of success, and no mandated effects: the GM almost always decides how skills work for their game.

I think that addresses the major systemic complaints. I've also added extensive notes on how to run skills in an OSR context in the *GM's Manual*.

Small Characters (p. 12)

I resisted adding this from the start, under the idea that it just added cruft. However, I've come around to the notion that a proper OSR game should, if it wants to be able to call itself complete, be able to do most of what the old-school core does, and races such as halflings are a rather common part of that. By leaving it optional I can have it so that most campaigns don't have to deal with it, but it's there if desired, and to a degree it fills in the shrink/reduce effect niche, also common.

CHAPTER III (p. 13)

The quick intro about money makes it clear that the game uses the silver standard, a common rule change to make a world's currency more realistic.

The game uses the wealth = XP rule, as I see it as absolutely foundational to old-school play. However, this ruleset deviates from the norm in that XP is calculated at a rate of 1 copper piece = 1 XP.

Why? Because again and again people complain about how much wealth is required for players to go up a level: the absurdity of trying to transport the huge amounts found, the effect these huge amounts would have on any economy, the inability of players to ever spend what they find, etc. Adjusting coinage in this way allow a huge drop in required treasure rewards. This does mean that converting any module requires both an adjustment to the silver standard and an additional divide-by-ten (so as not to over inflate XP awards from coin), but that's easy.

Note that the intent is not to alter levelling rates. While the amount of treasure placed is largely up to the GM, the assumption here is that GMs would place the equivalent amount of treasure as in any other old-school / OSR game.

Weapons (p. 13)

Older versions of the classic game ruleset went very simple with weapons. As newer editions were released, more and more weapons were introduced, and more and more rules added to help differentiate them. Ultimately, giant lists either boil down to a very small number of the best weapons rising to the top (with corresponding increased time to parse it all, and trap selections for new players), or the need to implement differentiating special rules that usually make the game cumbersome (weapon vs armour type, weapon speed factor, and so on).

I've gone with three classes of weapons. You get minimal damages of 1-2-4 and maximum damages of 4-7-11, so each larger weapon is better at both ends of the damage scale. Specifically, the average damage of a medium weapon will kill a single-HD foe, and the average damage of a large weapon a 2-HD foe. I think this gives a happy medium between complexity and the overly simplistic, while not needing two pages just to illustrate and describe all the polearms. And with how damage dice works for warriors, the difference between each weapon size continues to matter throughout the game: you get more D8s to throw if using a large weapon, but only more D4s if wielding a dagger or the like.

The overall bonus here is that players can just use what they think is cool, rather than poring over weapon tables to optimize damage to the last point. This is also important since, as mentioned earlier, magical weapons are often

acquired essentially at random (due to module placement or acquisition through treasure table rolls), and it would be nice to avoid players not wanting to use the sweet scythe or khopesh they just found because the weapon doesn't deal optimal damage (as an aside, this is also why weapon specialization doesn't exist here: an appealing idea in theory that often winds up restricting weapon usage due to instantly making all non-specialized weapons suboptimal).

There's a primitive weapon category to better capture the feel of such scenarios as battling low-tech / metal-poor tribes or impoverished bandit and peasant types. This way the king's men have a reason why they readily defeat bandits that otherwise are generally the same level and armed with what would have been the same weapons.

Missile weapons are mostly more relevant to Combat, so they'll be more thoroughly covered there. For now I just want to note the existence of the Missile Phase: you can't fire a bow while locked in melee, so missiles firing first means that archers are going to get the drop on opponents that aren't already in their faces. This eliminates the "I run up and stab the guy in the face while he stands there like an idiot with his bow drawn" phenomenon.

Armour (p. 14)

Simplifying, along the same lines as weapons. The full armour list used in later editions has too many damn entries, and many of them are anachronistic alongside each other. Such a list also fails to account for mismatched armour. Breaking it down to just three types greatly simplifies things, which is nice. More importantly, it makes it much easier to assign mechanical effects to each type (in terms of encumbrance, stealth, etc). This in turn allows more magical suits to be useful, similar to the effect of generic weapon types detailed above, since there's always a niche for each of the three armour categories.

No Dex penalties are applied by armour, as while the great "armour is hopelessly encumbering" vs. "armour is no worse than a heavy jacket" debates fly back and forth, I think we can safely agree that it doesn't appear to hinder fighting ability, even as like any other burden it does clearly affect endurance and movement speed (just as it does in this system, via the encumbrance rules).

The shield is worth highlighting. Most players agree that the mere +1 AC a shield provides is generally a poor representation of how useful it actually is in combat. +2 AC instead gives a meaningful reason to forgo that extra damage from a two-handed weapon. The extra save vs. breath weapon attacks is just a bit of classic genre emulation: warriors are forever crouching behind their shields to dodge the worst of a dragon's breath, so why not help that play out in the game? I've not bothered with a

rule negating the shield if its bearer is flanked, wanting to keep theatre-of-the-mind battles easier to arbitrate, but I've made it so that shields don't function vs. rear attacks.

I know "Shields Shall Be Splintered" is a very popular house rule, but I dislike it because it's gamey, making shields both absurdly and conveniently fragile (nobody, PC or NPC alike, will ever go down without their shield being broken). It also creates issues of shields exploding due to arrows and slings and people carrying around a bunch for this purpose. The rule only came about because shields suck in the older rulesets; I'd like to think I've solved that.

Adventuring Gear (pp. 14-16)

I've tried to keep the gear list as small as possible. Some games pride themselves on their enormous item lists detailed down to the button and goose egg, but I find all these do is bloat the page count, make it harder to find the stuff actually useful for adventuring, and for new players increase analysis paralysis (because a new player has no idea which items are actually useful in general) and the time required for character creation. Along these lines, I've added quick starter equipment lists, along the lines of the Moldvay fast packs, to help players pick quickly.

As described in the text, I also don't see the point in tracking large numbers of penny-sales, since players soon have more money than God. As this game emphasizes encumbrance, I just let them have what basic stuff they want. If they want to overload themselves, they take the encumbrance penalties: it's a meaningful choice. If a bulk purchase is desired—something where a GM no longer thinks it all being free is practical—a GM can easily make a house ruling on the cost for that one oddball instance.

There's no real surprises in the equipment list other than clarifying that you need special (expensive) oil to make your classic dungeon Molotov cocktails: scientifically, regular lamp oil simply does not work, and gameplay-wise it was a bit of a predictable and overused tactic facilitated by the extremely low cost. I've also added a standard trap-finding effect for the ten-foot pole.

Lifestyle & Downtime (pp. 16-17)

This is a nice bit taken from second edition and the SRD v5.1 (though I edited it to replace some of the modernist social notions that had slipped in, and based on writings from 10' Polemic I trimmed the various subtables and subcategories down to a core "bad, neutral, good" set of three). Lifestyle in general is flavourful, a way to add emphasis to urban adventures that the base ruleset tends to ignore, and a good way of draining the party treasury with some feeling of an actual return behind it. There's even potential adventure hooks. It's tied into carousing

material in the *GM's Manual*. However, I've deliberately left out ways to make money via this system, as I don't want to encourage crafting, everyday jobs, and otherwise favouring the mundane over adventure.

CHAPTER IV (p. 19)

Basically, everything you need to know to actually play outside combat and spells.

Task Resolution (p. 19)

Old-school task resolution is ad hoc—separate mechanics for find traps, find secret doors, bend bars/lift gates, force doors, the thieving system—but it's there all the same, which is not surprising, since RPGs at their core involve doing things via dice and you need to have some way of arbitrating that. I just figured why not codify it into a single rule rather than having a half-dozen separate subsystems and still wind up short when something new comes along.

The existence of the Task system does not remove the flexibility GMs enjoy in old-school systems. In old editions, the GM typically assigned a chance for anything to succeed and mandated a roll based on this, which is all a DC system does. The only difference here is that the specific type of die rolled is defined and some broad guidance given as to what a level of difficulty means in terms of the chance to succeed. But the precise difficulty level (and any modifiers) is usually the purview of the GM. The main issue is that a universal task resolution system does tend to lead to button-pushing, where almost everything is reduced to a dice roll, no matter how appropriate. That is a real worry, but I feel that GMs equipped with a knowledge of the dangers can work around this issue. In the game itself I've tried to bludgeon people to death with "don't overuse this" statements, but ultimately the game can only hold one's hand so far.

I can see objections to having a DC-based system in general (i.e., ignoring old-school issues for the moment and just focusing on general implementation issues). For the most part I view this as yet another case of hangover brought about by 3rd edition's "take a good idea and execute it awfully" approach, rather than a meaningful critique of having DCs at all. By ensuring that both the modifiers and the standard DCs are tightly bound, instead of 3rd ed's ocean of ability score and skill-based modifiers and DCs spiralling out to forever, the system remains manageable. Similarly, by not mandating a host of core rules effects via DCs and instead leaving effects in the GM's hands, many gameplay absurdities possible via 3rd edition (e.g. using high-rated Diplomacy scores to convince people of blatantly stupid and obvious lies) are avoided.

Broadly, the Task system emulates the DC system, but uses fixed and named / defined difficulty levels, which I think makes it easier to remember the numbers associated with things and to decide how to assign them (i.e. I find it more meaningful for the most part to say something is "Hard" rather than "DC 15", when players will very quickly learn to associate the words with the numbers). This comes at the expense of full 1-20 granularity, but I don't see that granularity as needed.

Because player Task bonuses are fixed and limited in scope (+1 per name level, and any stat bonuses), this ensures that the troublesome infinitely escalating check modifiers and DCs of later editions don't occur.

The starting of the difficulty scale at 8 is very deliberate. I find starting at 5 creates scenarios where people throw out too many easy difficulty challenges, simply because the option is there. I don't see the point to "make an Easy (DC 5) check": if it's easy, it should just happen (not to mention that DC 5 is still a 20% chance of failure, and that's not what I call easy). By starting at 8 (a 1/3 chance of failure), GMs will hopefully consider the assignment of challenges more carefully, including whether the situation is truly challenging at all.

I also mention the possibility of partial successes / failing forward, but I don't mandate it. The note is just there for those for whom the concept might be new, as just one more potential tool in the GMing chest.

Strength Checks: I've made it so that the strongest possible character must attempt any feat of Strength, to avoid the issue where everybody takes a try and the party succeeds through sheer number of rolls, even if it means that the weakest member succeeds and the strongest fails. For example, suppose three PCs (Str 10, 13 and 15) and a Hard check. If only the strongest can make the attempt, the chance of success is a straightforward 40%. If all three characters try in ascending order of Strength, the chance is almost 75%: $1 - (0.65 \times 0.65 \times 0.60) = 0.7465$.

Opposed Checks: I don't like systems that settle these by simply rolling off using 1D20 and adding the relevant ability score mod, with the highest result winning. Even a system like *Simulacrum*, which utilizes a full +/-3 score mod range, has a very small overall range between Olympian-level strength and a weakling if one only uses those score modifiers (e.g. Arnie at +3 would only get a 30% edge on a -3 child). By using the full score, you get a much more realistic range. The downside is that it's one of the very few things in the system where roll-low is the rule. I'm unhappy with that, but don't see a better way, and would prefer a better result for something so important over slavish adherence to mechanical consistency, which is an aesthetic concern, not a design one.

Saving Throws (p. 20)

Quite the challenge. Before I dig into my own approach, I think it would be worth taking a look at the three major competing approaches.

The Classic Five: The main failing of these is simply how clunky they are: painfully unintuitive, and also prone to overlap (“okay, save vs. poison, but then again it’s a magic poison”; “Hold Person: is that spell, or paralyzation? Oh wait, it came from a wand this time.”)

A big argument in favour of the classic five is that it allows for better differentiation between classes. However, as I have just two classes, that’s not an issue.

Fortitude/Reflex/Will: The main issue for me is that they’re so tightly tied to an already-existing ability score that one wonders why they need to exist (a problem worsened by *Simulacrum*, which literally has a Willpower stat). Why not just use Constitution, Dexterity, and Wisdom / Willpower?

Single Save Über Alles: As popularized by *Swords & Wizardry*. Simple as all hell, and avoids all the hidden mechanical issues by virtue of this, but its simplicity also of course results in a lack of granularity. Attempts to get around this often result in just adding a bunch of special-case modifiers, which then begins negating the advantage of simplicity which was the point in the first place.

There’s another problem in general, but though it’s commonly associated with the FRW system, it’s not actually inherent to that system. The Classic Five system results in characters getting better at making saves as they climb in level. The most common implementations of the FRW system do not: casters grow in the power to inflict their full spell effects on other as the game progresses. Again though, any of the above systems could have this effect, and it’s a legitimate choice either way: do you want dominant mages, or not?

Myself, I want not-so-dominant, as befitting older-style play. Which leads us to *Simulacrum*’s system.

By making saves a subset of Tasks, I can use the same ruleset twice, making things simpler and shorter. This also lets me piggyback on the Difficulty scale, giving GMs solid advice as to how hard a save should be thanks to the Task level categories. And by using ability scores modifiers as save modifiers, it allows for variety without creating strongly targetable casting tendencies (as happens with the FRW system; I made the saves of all damaging spells Arc-based, mirroring the old save vs. spell structure) bolting on too many widgets, or making stats too powerful (and with the allowance for stacking modifiers, such as $\text{Dex} \times 2$, you can easily make effects that are more easily resisted without new subsystems or a lot of verbiage; only the Sleep spell uses this in the default rules, but the option is there).

As for the matter of scaling (i.e. should it be easier or harder to resist casters as levels advance?), I’ve come down solidly on the side of “easier”, as it is in classic editions. The flat +3 bonus to all saves every 5 levels makes this easy to track, while giving an overall scaling and effect similar to earlier game editions.

I’ve set the default save as Hard (14 or better to save), which is why that difficulty level comes up so often. This is because a 1st-level character’s average save in 1st edition is 14 (14.1, but close enough). However, I’ve made all instant-death saves one level of difficulty lower, following the example set by B/X (1st ed doesn’t do this, interestingly enough).

As an aside, I did not implement any bonus for rods, staves and wands, as I felt the traditional 5% improvement over standard spell saves was too fiddly to bother with (the 5% modifier is something I tried to avoid in general, as it creates more work in terms of tracking things but provides almost no meaningful mechanical differentiation by itself). However, the *GM’s Manual* has a Campaign Matter offering a full difficulty level’s improvement in saves against effects from these items, if you really want to this to be noticeable.

Item Saving Throws: These are often brushed over as pure cruft, but I think the tendency to ignore them cuts out valuable avenues of play. Having item saving throws discourages players from simply bashing their way into every locked container, as you’re liable to destroy contents. More importantly, it encourages a “use it or lose it” style of play, where you can’t expect to hoard your potions, scrolls, and wands forever. If you just sit on these waiting for the “right” time, you face a decent chance of losing them without ever getting the chance to enjoy them.

General Adventuring (pp. 22-25)

All the essentials on four pages. Simple alphabetic layout, for ease of reference.

Climbing: Tries to answer some of the most common questions that old-school climbing rules all too often pass over: just how hard is climbing, how fast are you going, how often do you check, and where are you in the climb if you fail? Again, a common idea in the OSR is rulings over rules, but the burden on GMs this creates is considerable, and I see no reason to have a ruleset that avoids codifying such common scenarios; leave rulings to the more abstract and one-off areas, rather than something that’s going to come up quite regularly. I chose a standard climb rate instead of modifying the small move-rate amounts by encumbrance and surface type; that encumbrance affects the difficulty is granular enough. Tied into the Task and (optionally) skill systems and the simplified armour system.

For the sake of comparison, Reza Alipour holds the world record for climbing a vertical wall: 49.21 ft in 5.48 seconds (under tightly controlled circumstances, obviously).

Doors: The biggest change here is tying the discovery of secret doors to exploration movement. The slow rate of explorations (literally 1/25th of normal walking speed) was often justified by explaining that players were being cautious and examining their surroundings, but never tacked on any mechanical benefits to go along with that, despite having a base set of rules for that process (and it being an important part of dungeoneering in general).

As such, the party gets a chance as a collective to spot doors they pass by at the cautious rate, to help justify said how slow said rate is. A single player specifically deciding to stop and search a specific location has a much better chance of success, though (better than the original rules too, by a hefty amount: I bumped it from the original's ~16.5% to a 50% chance of success simply because spending a turn is a meaningful investment in these games, what with resource depletion and wandering monsters). Perception modifies all door searches, but its reward is greater for deliberate searches than passive ones.

Other changes include having no fixed rate as to how hard it is to listen at a door or force open a door (because they realistically would vary, after all), adding a section on spiking doors (feasible as a combat action, as it is in original editions), and allowing people to keep searching for secret doors as much as they want (why not? How would you justify not allowing this, and again, spending a turn is a meaningful investment so there's no real "cheat" here by permitting it.)

Lastly, the rule that doors always open for monsters is gone. No special reason here: it's simply that I've never been much for the "mythic underworld", especially in a setting-neutral ruleset.

Dying: I've avoided bleeding out as it's annoying to track. At the same time, it's important to have some sort of padding for characters, especially low-level ones, so that death isn't instant the moment you hit 0. B/X has that, and I think it's one of the major reasons people feel the OSR is about dying all the time (1st edition, by comparison, has the death only at -10 HP rule).

As such, once a PC hits 0 HP I've let them live or die based on their Con, modified by their Willpower and the damage they've taken (their death threshold). The fatigue penalty makes it so that someone at the point of death isn't running around right after unless they've received magic healing.

Excavating: Inspired by *LotFP*, but I heavily boosted the base rate (and increased the effect of Strength), as the fastest gravediggers in Central Europe (Ladislav and Csaba

Skladan) can manage about 48 cubic feet per hour. This is with extensive training and at an unsustainable burst rate, but I figure it shouldn't take a reasonably hardy adventurer with the proper tools 24 hours to dig a $2.5 \times 8 \times 4$ ft (80-cubic-foot) grave.

Falling: People have argued for decades as to what the damage for this should be. The issues are that the traditional damage scale (1D6 per 10 ft) is too lethal at low levels, too generous for high level ones, doesn't reduce mobility, and treats mice and elephants the same. I think I have a system that gets around all that.

While HP damage is still dealt (and 1D6 isn't as big a deal when every character has a base 1D8+8 HP), the main bite comes from a scaling Constitution ability check. For each point you fail the check by, you get one level of fatigue; failing by four or more points thus kills you. As it's a Con check, hardier characters are more resistant, to help allow for your Conans and the like who are always leaping from great heights. It uses the Size rules to help little guys fall farther. And tying it into the fatigue rules means your speed is reduced by a bad fall. The scale is based roughly on what is known as "LD50": the fact that statistically a lethal distance for falls for 50% of people is 50 ft (and 90% at 84 ft; here the values are 45% at 45 ft and 95% at 90 ft, assuming a Con of 9-12, so quite close to the real figures).

I've made it so that there's always a chance for survival, because fantasy fiction characters are always making great leaps and falls and also because of [Alan Magee](#), [Ivan Chisov](#), [Nicholas Alkemade](#), [Juliane Koepcke](#), and [Vesna Vulović](#) (though of course a 1 in 20 chance of auto-survival is much more generous than in real life).

Fatigue: I wanted this to matter, but I didn't want to deal with the headaches of very separate rules for starving and thirst and suffocation and lack of sleep and sheer physical exhaustion. This feeds it all into one system. In addition to the above, it's tied into the Morale rules—tired enemies will break more easily—and the Task system. Inspired by the v5.1 SRD as well as [this blog post](#).

Healing: I've changed this so that it requires general relaxation, rather than full bed rest. If we accept that Hit Points are an abstraction (as I most certainly encourage, as much as it is possible), then every "injury" should not be a physical wound requiring incapacitation to heal (not to mention that not all injuries require being committed to bed in order to heal in any case). This allows for more interesting use of downtime, rather than just lying around in bed all the time.

This ruleset also ties the healing rate to the character's level, rather than giving a flat rate of healing (which resulted hilariously in people healing more slowly the higher the level they were). And it adds consequences for

living in hovels / squatting in the forest (or living like a king) while trying to heal up.

Collectively, it's much easier to heal naturally in this ruleset, which is important when there's no guarantee that you'll have a healer in the party.

Hunting: The B/X version is rather vague. It tells you nothing other than you have a 1-in-6 chance of an animal encounter, whatever that means in terms of food. I've gone with something closer the BECM version, which is at once more general and specific, but in the right places.

I've skipped foraging altogether, as if it's free it's just one more roll, one that usually fails and so will never be counted on, whereas if it costs something like a hex point no one will ever bother with it unless it's a guaranteed success, in which case it's existing in the same design space as hunting and therefore is a redundant rule.

Tied into the Task system.

Jumping: Modified from the v5.1 SRD. People want to know how to handle this basic sort of stuff: pit traps and the like abound in OSR play, yet jumping is not usually covered. I made the values powers of ten to account for the fact that that's the standard map square size. I also adjusted the standing high jump so that strong warriors weren't necessarily fantasy Michael Jordans.

Lifting: Another straightforward, commonly asked-about element borrowed from the v5.1 SRD (though I've gone with $\times 15$ rather than $\times 30$, with a higher lift bonus for high Str to compensate, as it scales more realistically). I've emphasized that these are just guidelines so that we don't get too far into "later edition bad physics simulator" issues. That's generally true for any old-school game, but I felt it beared repeating here.

Light & Darkness: In terms of radius, I've given a large edge to torches compared to lamps (40 ft vs 20 ft). It's true that torches have a greater utility (general combat; use vs mummies, webs, green slime), but those are incidental situations that aren't enough to make someone take a torch over a lamp, due to the considerably increased duration lamps get. If the two had the same light radius, lanterns would be chosen every time, due to delve duration / encumbrance factors.

I've gone with a base 40 ft for torches rather than B/X's 30 ft or 2nd ed's 15 ft because in actual play you need a decent amount of light to actually run battles and whatnot. If you shrink the radius too much, you rapidly hit a point where party members can't cover each other with their light radiuses (unless everyone blobs together) and so everyone needs to carry their own personal light source or have their own torchbearer, which has a great effect on how battles are fought. I also got rid of the annoying-to-

adjudicate "dim light / flickering shadows" illumination aspect and just made all light radiuses binary.

The ruling that spotting distance in the dark for a light source is effectively infinite comes from the fact that the human eye can readily spot a candle at 400 meters. Source: <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/539826/how-far-can-the-human-eye-see-a-candle-flame/> by way of <https://arxiv.org/abs/1507.06270>. The ruling on corners obstructing light is a simple abstraction from one of the creators of OSRIC: it seems odd to me that such a fundamental scenario was never covered in the rules, since exploration in the dark is a foundational element of play.

Lockpicking: This is too specialized to call it an everyman skill, but I wanted to give multiple ways to acquire the ability, and as such it can be both a feat and a skill. The ability works better when a feat (i.e. gives lower difficulties) because dedicating a feat slot to it is a more meaningful investment than a skill slot.

I've allowed two attempts at picking a lock before it becomes unpickable, instead of the usual one attempt, as I wanted to give a bit more incentive for people to see this ability as useful. However, rather than 1st edition's 1-10 minute time requirement, I've made each attempt require a full turn (easier to adjudicate, clear cost required for a repeat attempt).

Moving Silently: Integrated into the Task system. I dislike making stealth checks opposed checks (or just plain harder) when there are guards. You're never sneaking against the darkness: the whole point of stealth is to avoid the notice of someone, even if you're not sure they're there, so why add extra difficulty based on the obvious, standard situation (i.e. someone is there who might notice you)? It's like creating a combat system where there's a "standard" attack value, and then a special combat value that's "only" used when you try to swing your sword at an enemy.

Perception Checks: This would be one of the many modern design elements whose heart was good but which was led astray by evil councilors.

The main problem with most versions of this ability is that 1) it makes adventure writers overly reliant on mechanics and 2) prompts players to spot check everything every five feet, because they'd be idiots if they didn't—not their fault; it's what the ability provides and even necessitates.

By placing the ability instead solely in the hands of the GM, I can at least avoid problem two. Problem one is actually avoided simply by OSR modules not assuming the existence of any such ability.

Perception checks are the one canonical instance (other than the *Sleep* spell) where the effect of one's ability score can be doubled. That's because this is what the Perception score literally exists for. As such, relying on the common 1-3 point modifier scale for ability scores would be largely pointless: why have an ability with a 2-19 scale if its sole purpose is to in turn generate a 1-3 point scale? A 2-6 scale is more useful, although still obviously a bit of an improvisational kludge in this light. Making it a flat ability check didn't work either, as this removes my ability to easily adjudicate group checks and makes it too easy for a player with a high score to spot their way through everything, unless I apply modifiers all the time (in which case, I might as well just have stuck with the Task system anyways). I'm not thrilled with the end result, but it works well enough as a one-off exception.

Poison: This is save or die by default, as was typical for old-school editions, though there are allowances for weaker poisons, as did exist in the game (this is examined in more detail in the GM's Manual).

Swimming: Pretty standard stuff. Ties into the simplified armour system.

Time: A round is 10 seconds, not 1 minute (or 6 seconds). Indoors, the usual 10-minute turns are standard.

Trap Detection: An everyman skill, rather than a thief skill; one of the main (and I think, justified) complaints about the creation of the thief is that it removed what should be everyman skills, especially ones essential for survival in a dungeon environment. It's been tied into the Task system. Like with secret doors, you can do this as many times you want now, and exploration movement grants a chance to notice traps (though again, not as well as if you go out of your way to look for them). Unlike with doors, I kept the standard trap spotting difficulty, as it seemed reasonable (they're all deliberately concealed, and we can set a baseline for how hard that typically is to see).

I removed any notation about traps only working X times out of 6 or what have you, since that should depend on the trap and dungeon/environment rather than be systemic and fixed; in my opinion, it's more of a legitimately variable factor than spotting difficulty.

Movement & Encumbrance (pp. 26-28)

In general I found separate move values for exploration, combat, running, and sprinting (in turn all modified by encumbrance) way too fiddly for my desires.

I've left all the movement rules in the Player's Manual (including the default random encounter rates and how getting lost occurs), rather than the GMs book, because I intend for wilderness exploration to be a core part of the game and so want to impress that on players. By having

these rules player-facing, players can see them and make informed decisions about how their travel decisions affect their progress.

Overland Movement: I've removed the "rest after every six days" rule as being not worth the space.

I've given a standard move rate for PCs on foot over clear terrain of 24 miles a day. This is rather generous: the British Army's 1909 / 1912 Field Service Regulations gave a standard march rate of 3 miles an hour—including short halts—for small bodies of infantry *on roads* (though this would still be more bodies than in an adventuring group, and with a need to maintain formation). However, in a concession to gameplay, 4 is easier to work with than 3 (more granularity), and you're often losing one point due to one or more people in the party being in heavy armour anyways, so I'm using the higher rate.

However, the miles per hour rate is only there for reference and conversion purposes. The real system, unlike the vast majority of OSR games, is built around points instead of miles, with each overland hex assumed to be six miles and given a point cost. This goes back to the very beginnings of fantasy gaming, which used rules built off of Avalon Hill's *Outdoor Survival* game (which in turn used the same general sort of hex-point system as I have).

Why not just have everything in miles and then use a series of multipliers for terrain and the like? Originally that's what I had. However, if you actually try to run a game with that you run into difficulties, as those numbers don't play with hexes well. In 1st ed play, for instance, you'd be constantly making little dots all over the map, trying to track party movement in fractional-hexes. Using 30-mile hexes, but travelling 10 miles a day? You'll be making 1/3-hex marks for every day of travel. 3.5-mile hexes on heavy horses? Make a mark every 1.43 hexes or so. This doesn't even account for crossing multiple kinds of terrain in a single day, which requires prorating the movement in one region and calculating a proportion for what's left over for the next. Blergh. Credit to Delta [for exploring these scenarios in detail](#).

Thanks to all this, I've just mandated a six-mile hex ([here's why I picked that scale](#)) and created an overland travel system that returns to the type of system the game began with. Now you simply get travel points and spend them to enter a hex, and mods like weather and encumbrance are very easily added to this base point cost. Scales up easily in powers of six (down, not so much, but conversion is possible).

As an aside, I've used D12 for this rather than D20 because the "hex cost as modifiers" approach works really well with a D12, but not so much with a D20.

Cautious March: Taken from the Alexandrian blog, I thought this made an interesting new option for overland travel. Going slower means possibly more food used, but could be very valuable on the return from a dungeon, when resources are low and wandering monsters would be a more serious threat.

Forced March: I felt it was important that pushing-on rules be included, because inevitably an adventure is going to have a point where time is of the essence. Ties into the Morale and fatigue rules. Could create fun scenarios where the players are desperate to press on but tired NPCs are pushing for rest.

With a forced march on clear terrain, a group can cover up to 30 miles a day. This is well within the realm of the possible even with gear: the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment in late 1942 covered, in a three-day forced march, 136 miles with full equipment (Ambrose, *D-Day: June 6, 1944*, p. 141; about 45 miles a day).

Navigation: When a party becomes lost, the standard rules either wing it, or rely on a table to give degrees of direction off-course. Inspired by the module *The Treasure Vaults of Zadabad*, I've instead adopted a solution that works with the hex-point system. Getting lost is now mainly treated as a time waster, but also causes a random encounter check. The base odds of getting lost are about half that of the traditional rules, but adds allowances for bad weather, ranger-like skills, and having a guide or map.

Searching a Hex: This is a new mechanic, built with the assumption that a hexcrawl will be the usual wilderness exploration mode. Players can choose to wander around and see if there's any interesting features in the hex.

I've divided all features into overt and hidden, so that some are pretty much automatically encountered and others needed to be specifically hunted for using the search mechanic. The GM decides which are which. I was pretty impressed with myself until I saw that the Necropraxis blog had done the exact same thing back in 2013, the only difference being "obvious" features instead of "overt". My solution is clearly superior because it saves two letters.

Exploration Movement: Uses the standard old-school move rates. Provides mechanical benefits to classic slow move rates: now there's a reason to move through a dungeon at a rate similar to crawling on your hands and knees besides "the rules say so" (though I've also played up the fluff angle on this). *Blood & Treasure* has explicit rules for this, too.

Mechanical benefits having been assigned, I've given the option to move at a faster rate, instead of forbidding it simply because "that's how the game works", which always irks me. The risks are clear, and on the players.

The rule requiring 10 minutes' rest every hour of exploration was dropped. It added nothing useful in terms of either gameplay or realism, as the already crawling pace of the party is more than enough to account for this.

I've gone with the first edition suggested rate for indoor wandering monster encounter checks (1 every three turns) instead of the B/X method (1 every two turns). There's no particular reason I chose one over the other, though, and of course an individual dungeon can be set to whatever rate the GM desires.

I've also set a standard "noisy" -4 penalty to the next wandering monster check if the party winds up being making a lot of noise. As a very common situation, I wanted the effects of this stated clearly. A noisy situation does not include combat, because while realistically that's rather noisy and a further mechanical incentive to avoid combat appealed to me, I felt that it would require too much tracking (since combats are much more common than the other situations) and could easily lead to a combat spiral, where a combat triggers the noisy modifier, which in turn triggers another combat, etc.

Encumbrance: Everyone's bugbear. I enjoy the *LotFP* system and so used that as a base, but felt it needed some tweaking. For instance, it doesn't make any allowances for superior strength, which seems an odd oversight. I add a character's Strength modifier to their payload capacity. I also don't like that the *LotFP* system doesn't assume a base state: I like to let adventurers have a base weapon and some fluffy gear without tracking it, and build from there with found or knowingly added stuff.

Compared to other editions, character Strength matters more than some (B/X, BECMI) and less than others (1st and 2nd edition); I did this mostly for reasons of simplicity, wanting the stat to have some effect but not wanting to deal with the much larger encumbrance tables necessitated by systems based purely on Strength.

With this system, the available burden levels give you less of an extra collective weight allowance boost than with most old-school systems. For example, old systems used tend to give you a very light base allowance, so that you're almost always suffering from light encumbrance, but allow you anywhere from 2 to 6 times your carrying capacity if you're willing to accept burden levels. I've done it this way for two reasons. For one, characters here can carry a bit more before being encumbered at all (helpful for this game's smaller parties), though this breaks down in certain cases, mostly with lightweight things that are rated as medium items (such as torches). For another, I've greatly increased the amount of XP a player gets for the average coin (discussed further below), so that what you can carry is worth far, far more in terms of XP (the most important

aspect of encumbrance) than it would appear if you just compared the number of coins carried.

Encumbrance & Coins: Standard-rules money (10 coins to the pound) means every coin needs to be twice as heavy as a silver dollar. Whereas you might need some 5,000 lbs of coins for a fighter to go from 7th to 8th level if assuming a gold standard and 10 coins to the pound, in *Simulacrum* you do it with 5,000 silver or 500 gold, weighing from 10 to 50 pounds (and able to be carried using from 10 to 1 item points, depending on the coin). See [this article](#) for an analysis of why the standard way can be rather awkward.

There's a general notion that the value in making coins quite heavy is that it's a necessary brake on player advancement speed. I wrestled with this for a while but eventually determined that, with coinage being the most important part of the game, no matter what you do to make it annoying, players will put up with it. If they need to bring porters and mules just to carry coins, they will, and there's only so many bullshit porter and mule ambushes past prepared player defenses you can pull off, even if you wanted such an adversarial game. Advancement is already slow, and can be adjusted as desired simply by giving out less coinage. All making coins the weight and size of amulets does is make advancement logistically annoying, without meaningfully changing gameplay. There's enough challenge in OSR play already that I didn't see the need to distort the economy and mandate silly coin sizes just to add yet one more, especially since—again—the GM controls wealth distribution.

For example, a naked Str 12 character in 1st edition (completely unrealistic in terms of an actual adventurer, but we're going best-case-scenario here) can carry up to 1,150 coins before hitting max encumbrance; assuming standard gold pieces, that's 1,150 XP. More realistically though, with the official carrying capacities (100 coins for a small sack, 300 coins for a backpack, 400 coins for a large sack) vs necessary gear, a character is practically limited to carrying about 500 coins each. Anything more takes on extra risks: moving slow and having both hands full, having to deal with pack animals or bearers, etc. At 500 coins, even 1st-level characters can't carry out enough treasure in one go to advance a level. As such, this isn't merely a matter of realism—a charge a lot of coinage reforms are tarred with—but practical gameplay.

A typical *Simulacrum* PC at Str 12 has 2-3 item points left over after picking a reasonable amount of starting gear. Assuming standard silver pieces, that's 1,500 silver pieces, which is in turn 15,000 XP (since each silver piece is worth 10 XP). This means that even as players climb to the higher levels, they'll still be able to haul away meaningful

amounts of XP from a crawl even if they don't have or want their own personal wagon train, or for lower-magic games where you don't want *Bags of Holding* everywhere. Only at levels 8+ is this possible to start to mean hard choices (presuming more valuable coinage isn't found, but it's likely by then that you're dealing with gold and platinum).

I've made gems a universal 1 coin in encumbrance, as the LBBs and the Rules Cyclopedia did. Realistically gemstones will vary just as their possible values will vary, but a lot of that can come down to gem type, gem quality and cut/finish quality, rather than pure size. All in all, though, the Kohinoor Diamond, one of the finest gemstones every known, weighs only 21.12 grams, so I see little point to an encumbrance scale for gemstones based on claims of realism. If you hand out an enormous gem of the classic emeralds-for-statue-eyes variety, just make up a special encumbrance rate for that very unusual piece.

Encumbrance & Armour: In recent years there's been pushback against the very old idea that heavy plate armour left one so inflexible and encumbered that you couldn't mount your own horse without help, pick yourself up if fallen, and the like. Modern recreations [such as this](#) have shown this to be garbage. At the same time, it's possible to go too far with this. Armour is encumbering: even if it doesn't prevent you from performing many tasks, the weight ensures that you're definitely slowed while doing them, even if carrying nothing else. This is why heavy armour here automatically burdens you one level (an effect which I've keyworded, in case something else might fit it). At the same time, burden levels do not reduce your initiative, Dex AC bonus, or generic Dex checks: they just penalize movement speed. The penalty usually drops your combat speed by 25%. "[Obstacle Run in Armour](#)", by Daniel Jacquet, recorded move rate drops very close to half for those in full plate, but that was over a longer time scale (about 3 minutes).

The encumbrance system has been tied into the new outdoors hex-based movement rules.

Lastly, I've resisted adopting the usage die as a means of tracking consumables, preferring to track them via traditional encumbrance instead. For the most part I feel that the usage die is the best example of a solution in search of a problem that I can think of, a mechanic that replaces tracking of individual items with ... the tracking of individual items, but with a strong added storygaming element that also removes player agency ("I know you would have preferred to prepare for this delve, but it turns out you're out of torches: sorry").

Mounts: Broadly following the *LotFP* system, but modified again to account for the new outdoors movement rate, and to simplify a bit here and there (some modifiers have been dropped or changed).

The “Battle” rule on untrained mounts running or throwing their riders has been extrapolated from the 1st edition entry for horses and extended to all such mounts. This is why you want a warhorse over a riding horse.

Retainers (p. 29)

While I like retainers, I made them optional because of the bookkeeping and the sheer alteration of gameplay that having your own personal posse entails. I tried to be clear on what they are and what their role entails (something previous descriptions have sometimes stumbled with). Charisma effects have obviously been removed.

XP for retainers wasn’t very clear in Moldvay; I’ve used the clearer Mentzer method.

Level Progression (p. 29)

A single XP chart, because there’s only two roughly equal classes. While the game is intended to give an edge to the smaller parties that I envision using it, players in general do not advance faster, feeling that slower advancement rates are a key aspect of OSR play. However, they can earn more silver / XP by dint of not having to split it as much, and of course the GM largely decides how much treasure is handed out and thus how fast advancement is anyways.

CHAPTER V (p. 31)

We open with gameplay advice for the players. As I argued earlier, mindset is an essential add-on to a solid rules base when trying to make a game OSR. While I’ve left most of the game-running advice in the *GM’s Manual*, I felt it vital to hammer home to players that they should not expect to hack and slash their way through a game. The whole “combat is a failure state” claim regarding OSR play is an overdone meme, but there’s something at the heart of it, especially for those players who are coming from 2nd ed and later and so used to combat as the standard solution and means of advancement.

There’s three main things I wanted from the combat round structure. First, it had to be easy to follow. Second, it had to deliver results that made it worth rolling for initiative each round. Third, it had to deliver certain results I wanted, which were primarily fast missile attacks and slow interruptible spells.

I’ve gone with a variant on B/X’s phased initiative system. Instead of movement, missile, magic and lastly melee, I’ve gone with missile, movement, melee, and lastly

magic. All combat is by default simultaneous. Initiative is rolled after missiles, but only determines who moves first.

By structuring things the way I have, you can’t run up a stab an archer in the face while he stands there like an idiot holding a ready bow.

Surprise (pp. 31-32)

I originally used the old-school X-in-X chance mechanics here. However, I wasn’t thrilled with their seemingly arbitrary nature: doesn’t initiative already measure getting the drop on someone? Why are a quarter or third of all encounters, all other things being equal, complete shockers resulting in 10 seconds to a minute of pure inaction by at least one side? It results in a high lethality, without much in the way of room for player skill to mitigate it.

As such, I’ve switched to making surprise only applicable during ambush-type situations. I’ve broadly standardized these, including the common invisibility effect. The method, which uses the Task system, can easily convert any of the old-style X-in-X-chance creatures. As it is a group Per check, perceptive parties will have less likelihood of being caught unawares (and those who’ve skimped on Per may occasionally wind up paying for it).

A new addition is forcing a Morale check if members of a group have low Morale and are killed while surprised (for those creatures that use Morale, of course). Both history and fiction are filled with stories of smaller groups forcing off more numerous enemies solely through surprise, with green troops breaking under sudden onslaughts.

Lastly, surprise is what allows one to duplicate the classic backstab mechanic. This is an ability available to anyone, and works regardless of creature type.

As for what surprise does, it simply gives a free round of actions with a +4 attack bonus and negates Dex modifiers. I had no desire to deal with the Lovecraftian nightmare of 1st edition surprise (even if it does result in some truly interesting tactical combat at times).

Declarations (p. 32)

I wanted spellcasters to face meaningful tactical decisions, and in some ways shape the entire battlefield. By declaring spells at the very start of the round, in a fashion anyone observing is aware of, but not actually casting until the end of the round, spell interruption becomes a real threat. This makes each side want to move to perform that interruption, while at the same time trying to protect their own casters.

Combat Stances (p. 33)

Additional combat options are incredibly tricky to implement. The grim spectre of realism hangs over all

attempts to alter traditional combat, which at its base is a bland but largely quick and perfectly serviceable set of mechanics, deliberately abstracted. Efforts to add realism and granularity often trigger further such additions, because now you have an odd mix of simulation and abstraction in the same set of rules. By the end of things, you can easily end up with an incredibly time-consuming combat round that, even if it plays out the way you like, practically mandates the use of minis and a tactical map. Every choice, every option: they slow the game down, and so need to be selected carefully.

When I looked at adding bits, my goal was variety and meaningful tactical choice rather than a general idea of making combat more realistic. Fantasy RPG rulesets typically devote dozens of pages to magic; I thought that melee deserved some of this attention as well. Yes, this can be roleplayed, but so can everything else: this cannot be an excuse to keep combat 100% basic any more than it can be to boil down combat to the result of a coin-flipping contest (or to drop the number of available spells by 95%). As always, the dilemma is increased mechanical variety vs. the burden placed on time and page space options impose.

Stances are my answer, a small set of intuitive, simple, but meaningful choices. I feel they give a bit more detail and colour than “I hit it with my sword” but at the same time are only broad statements of intent (“I press the attack”) instead of a prescriptive, detailed list of maneuvers that remove the ability to roleplay and/or theatre-of-the-mind your way through a battle if you so desire.

I’ve found that the tendency to place to-hit penalties on special attacks results in them not being used. This is the reason I made the warrior’s brawler special ability trigger automatically, rather than having to be declared; see *ACKS*’ rarely-used special attacks for a good example of the results of imposing a to-hit tax on such instead. It’s also why stances don’t invoke penalties.

The offensive and defensive stances are very simple. The names do the heavy lifting in this case, but even just the act of declaring them gives a player a feel for what they’re doing. +2 (i.e. +10%) is just enough that it becomes a meaningful option, without being unbalancing.

Dash allows one to short-circuit the standard initiative procedure, attacking first instead of simultaneously. It’s an option for when a player feels they absolutely have to take out a target before it gets to attack back: in play, facing poison enemies has often prompted choosing this.

Guard is the most interesting one. We hear constantly of the idea that the fighter is the meatshield protecting the caster from interruption. However, early editions don’t really allow for this, unless you literally block all paths to a caster. Later editions tried to implement something along

these lines with attacks of opportunity or marking, but both have well-known problems. The guard stance allows someone to protect something, but in a way that doesn’t impose itself artificially on the battle and which doesn’t generate interrupts and exceptions. “If you want to get to him, you have to go through me” happens very naturally through this, without much complexity.

Sizes & Combat (p. 33)

An increasingly important part of later editions, I like the way this plays out if using maps, and it also has ramifications elsewhere: it allows me to keyword various effects rather simply (viewing distance, some spells, and so on).

Making Attacks (p. 33)

This is mostly a straightforward clone of older editions, with a few exceptions. I thought a lot about what general combat modifiers should exist. On the one hand, rewarding tactical play (and as a result adding meaningful choice to combats) is a good idea. On the other, a lot of people enjoy older editions specifically because combat is simple. Additionally, the more effects you add that rely on positioning, the harder it becomes to arbitrate combat from a theatre of the mind perspective, which I don’t mandate but want to fully support. As such, I largely kept this quite simple. As an aside, a flanking modifier was deliberately left out because, over and above being harder to track in theatre of the mind combat, the game’s assumption of small party sizes in effect means that a party would regularly be hit with this penalty, as it would very often be outnumbered and thus easily flanked.

Creatures always hit on a natural 20 because this goes a long way towards replicating the “repeating 20s” aspect of old-school combat matrices. For example, in 1st edition, even the absolute weakest creatures in the game can hit up AC -4 on a natural 20 (the equivalent of AC 24 in this system). A basic 1 HD orc can hit up to AC -6. Using a straight 20-point scale means that such creatures are only able to hit AC 21. This in turn really takes the teeth out of lower-level creatures once the players have any decent amount of protection available.

The note on neither positive or negative Dex AC mods applying if you can’t move is so that a surprised / immobile target is treated absolutely equally. You shouldn’t have different degrees of immobility because of Dex (which you shouldn’t be able to use, because you’re immobile).

Missile Phase (p. 34)

The rule for the effects of weather on missile fire comes from *Night’s Dark Terror*.

Firing into melee is allowed, simply because a prohibition against such is perhaps the best example of a gamist rule that I can think of. “I want to.” “You can’t.” “I should be able to: why not?” “Because the rules say so.” It doesn’t matter that the rule may be justified in terms of gameplay; this sort of blanket prohibition regardless of the circumstances and in contravention of what reality says can absolutely happen naturally rubs players the wrong way. Overall, I prefer to let players take their chances, especially in desperate situations. The trick then is to create a rule that arrives at the same gameplay effect (because sometimes even obnoxious rules serve a key purpose), without the sense of arbitrary whimsy. Thus the ruling that you can fire into melee, but with a decent chance of hitting someone else (including friends) unless the target is big (in which case it’s automatically able to be singled out, rather than 1st edition’s more complex method of assigning fractional chances based on size). Randomly determining the target before firing also prevents any Armour Class weirdness due to shifting targets.

Range modifiers are probably the biggest departure, being much more severe than most games. I have to admit to being swayed solely by realism here: the idea of missile weapons being super sniper weapons at great range against singular moving targets drives me nuts. The idea that they are such comes from Hollywood and a generalist idea of medieval battles, with most people forgetting that it was massed fire against densely packed mass targets that allowed reliable hits at the longest ranges. See Delta’s articles on missile weapons for a good examination of all this. If all this fails to convince, well, the range modifiers are easily reduced with no greater effect on the system, except to make the marksman feat less useful.

There’s also no rule that triples the ranges outdoors, sticking to just one set of ranges for simplicity’s sake. Bow ranges are halved indoors as you can’t arc your shots upwards, which is what provides much of the range.

Heavy cover is deliberately left undefined, other than the obvious “more than the 50% of half cover”. I didn’t want to give a percentage figure like 75% or something that might cause an annoying stop in the action to calculate this. This is a good opportunity to utilize the GM autonomy and decision-making aspects of old-school play.

Initiative and the Movement Phase (p. 34)

Because all combat is simultaneous (with the exception explained below), initiative is only needed to resolve who moves first. This is why it doesn’t take place at the start of the round, as is typical. I figured I’d place it immediately before the one action it most powerfully affects.

I went with a D12 for initiative rolls. The traditional D6 gives too small a range for mods to be easily applied, while the D20 too easily drowns them out. A D12 maintains compatibility with anything built with the D6 system in mind, while giving just the right amount of granularity.

I’ve also gone with a single roll for initiative. Individual initiative gives more variance, but groups is quicker and simpler. You also can’t beat the drama that comes from a single key roll. Everyone stops and focuses; their attention is grabbed; a good roll provokes cheers; a bad roll, jeers.

Combatants can move once, whether they attack or not. I don’t like systems where you can give up your move for an extra attack, as that encourages static combats (though to be fair, the “locked in melee” mechanic does too, but I feel that at least gives interesting results, and I see no reason to compound that without a similar return).

Every PC moves the same rate here, for simplicity’s sake (unless encumbered): 40 ft per combat move. I dislike the complexity and nesting tables that a pile of different movement modes creates (as seen in the B/X movement table), but based on playtester feedback I added a running option for combat that is reasonably simple (give up your actions to move half again as fast), to add more tactical choice in combats.

A rule for invisible or flying combatants auto-escaping was added, and I clarified how a fighting withdrawal works in terms of attacks.

Set vs charge appears here as a movement action, since you surrender your movement to do it.

Movement here is valuable because positioning is often vital. In dungeons, chokepoints are a regular thing. Being able to block a hallway where it expands into a chamber can be the difference between life and death. And because coming within 5 ft of an enemy usually prevents everyone involved from moving (due to the locked in melee rules), having the first move allows you to potentially lock down the battlefield the way you want. In play it often comes down to being able to form up a preferred order and protect the mages before the enemy can rush the party.

Grappling (p. 35)

I think this ruleset is usable but not abusable, short, simple and quick. All monsters up to size Large in the *GM’s Manual* have Strength values (though of course you can easily wing that, too).

Armed opponents get a free attack against grapple attempts, and it’s deliberately a very strong attack (bonus to hit, plus auto crit). There is a reason why people didn’t try to tackle people with swords all that often, and I wanted to ensure that such a tendency was duplicated here, to

avoid absurdities where the best way to win a fight was to pile into an armed opponent.

At the same time, I think it's important to make it so that players don't just feel free to wade into groups of 100 goblins and trust their AC and badass magic weapons to make them invincible. A full-on subdual is hard to pull off against an armed opponent, especially if the attackers are small. This is deliberate: for the same reason the game does not use flanking rules, I didn't want it to be too easy to overwhelm the smaller player groups that this game assumes. But if the players are contemptuous of the opposition, they should pay for that. One of the great strengths of 1st edition is that it handles this properly (if somewhat clumsily) and I wanted to achieve that as well in an easier-to-use fashion.

Example: Against goblins, a typical 1st-level warrior of average Strength (11) gets a –6 bonus to their roll (for being a size level larger). As goblins are Str 8, this effectively makes a 1st-level warrior the equivalent of 2 goblins. And as grapple attacks always go last, and combatants get one free attack per round against grapple attempts (with each successful attack likely to kill a goblin), it can be said a typical 1st-level warrior is worth up to 4 goblins (2 killed via melee attacks if they're lucky with their attack and damage rolls, and then an effective 17 Str vs the 16 of the two surviving goblins).

A 10th-level warrior with Str 18 and the Wrestling skill—a mighty grappler indeed—will have a –11 bonus (–6 for size, –3 for Wrestling, –2 for two name levels), for a total effective Str of 29. However, they will still only kill the same two goblins in the Melee Phase. This makes the warrior the equivalent of 6 goblins (2 almost certainly dead, 4 survivors at $8 \times 4 = 32$ Str).

One can fight up to 8 small or medium opponents at a time, so you see that even a high-level warrior can be overwhelmed if they're not careful. But it's not easy: the warrior would have to be heavily isolated so that almost every square around them contained an enemy.

Hordeslayer does make it almost impossible for a warrior to be overwhelmed by small opponents (since it would trigger off the bonus attack just like any other attack), but tougher foes that cannot be killed in one hit are still a threat.

Dealing Damage (pp. 35-36)

Mostly already covered under weapons. Unarmed combat damage is deliberately weak, although a very strong man can still kill 0-level folks with a single punch (which is fine).

Critical hits simply deal max damage. This deals a result worth getting excited over, while at the same time actually being quicker than a regular attack (since you skip

the rolling for damage part). For a regular old-school game it wouldn't be particularly exciting (“yay, I did 7 points on my 1D6+1 roll, something I stood a decent chance of doing anyways”), but with the use of scaling damage dice for warriors, this becomes more valuable the more dice you have in an attack.

Why not critical hits for monsters and NPCs? While some GMs may consider that anything the players can do, monsters or at least NPCs should be able to do as well, there's no real need for this other than an overly developed sense of symmetry. *Simulacrum* uses LBB-style monsters (D6 Hit Points and generally only 1 attack), but I know some GMs will prefer the style of the editions that came later. If so, thanks to the claw/claw/bite philosophy of monster design so often used by old-school games (and thus the support materials produced for them which many GMs will often adapt), monsters usually have more attacks than PCs, and will often outnumber them as well, and so it would be relatively easy for them to score criticals. If for some reason you really want to allow criticals for enemies anyways, at the very least 0-level/sub-1 HD opponents should not be allowed to score them, lest you have the “peasants mauling a storm giant to death” phenomena.

Lastly, there are no critical fumble rules because they're generally awful. They tend to only be added due to that same misplaced sense of symmetry: “if we have critical hits, surely we need the opposite”. But a skilled combatant isn't tossing their sword away or accidentally decapitating their best friend 5% of the time. While there are mechanics you can implement to reduce that percentage, one has to ask—what is gained? There's still no real worth to fumbles in the first place unless you really like *Paranoia*. What is often also missed is that such rules penalize martial classes far more than caster classes, since martials are the ones in general doing all the rolling.

Magic Phase (p. 36)

In terms of general combat involving non-magical opponents, all magic is the same speed as it all goes off in this phase. However, when multiple spells are being cast in the same round, mages get into spell duels in this phase. This is where the choice of a lower-level spell can matter, as it's almost always faster than a higher-level spell (scroll casting and feats can change the arithmetic just a bit). *Magic Missile* is a very valuable duelist spell for that reason. As players are generally aware of the presence of spellcasters in combat, but not what they might be casting, I've come to enjoy the players' chewing their nails over spell selection at the start of each round, wondering if they should go with the weaker but faster spell or risk going for the slower but more potent spell they really want to cast.

Morale Checks (p. 36)

Moved to the end of the round rather than the start, which makes little difference practically but is a bit more intuitive. I also converted it to a D20 scale, for the usual reason of wanting to allow more granularity in applying modifiers but also to help things be more compatible with 2nd ed's larger pool of monsters, which use a similar scale.

I've added extra potential reasons to check Morale to the ruleset, to encourage good tactics. If you surprise an opponent this is automatic, while the use of fire, killing the enemy leader, and unexpected power are all triggers that are recommended but not mandated.

Escaping an Encounter (p. 37)

I added a simple chase system that allows for some back and forth but doesn't require tracking the precise number of feet between the two groups. Being faster no longer grants you an auto-escape, and I added some interesting terrain-based modifiers, taken from *Delving Deeper*. I used a D12 instead of 2D6 so as to not make any single modifier point mean too much. I deliberately made player choices (going invisible; tossing down food, treasure, caltrops, or fire oil) provide the highest modifiers, as that places the emphasis on player planning over circumstantial factors like terrain. Now you can wear heavy armour (which slows you) but if you plan it right by allotting space to appropriate gear the odds are still in your favour to escape, rather than heavy armour always being a deathtrap if you need to flee.

CHAPTER VI (p. 39)

About a third of the book for magic. I've chopped the magic rules down heavily, but as I've chopped everything down heavily, magic can't help but be a large percentage of the work. Overall I'm getting about 12 spells to the page, compared to the 5.1 SRD's average of 5 to the page.

Preparing Spells (p. 39)

It's important to have it so that slightly interrupted sleep doesn't prevent spell preparation the next morning. If a simple night attack (and the resulting lost sleep) prevents preparation, then that's an incredible incentive against wilderness travel beyond a day from your home base. That's why I've only gone with four hours of rest required (plus the hour needed for prep), with the stated assumption in the GM's Manual that night attacks come at a point where the caster can continue to rest for another four hours afterwards, so that adventuring can continue.

The precise amount of time required (4 hours of rest immediately prior, plus 1 hour for the actual preparation) is key because, assuming the usual random encounter roll

every half-hour, it mandates 9 checks for potential interruption if a group is trying to hole up in a dungeon and prepare fresh spells. This is about an 80% chance for at least one interruption in that period, enough to make spell recovery largely impractical in most cases. This is an important step in fighting the 15-minute adventuring day.

Casting a Spell (p. 39)

You can cast even if locked in melee, as otherwise touch-based attack spells become impossible to function (since casting uses all your actions; i.e. you can't cast and also move to touch anyone). Doing so is a bold choice though, since if struck a caster has their spell interrupted.

There are no spell components. Likely one of the most commonly ignored rules in D&D, it adds a lot of tracking and tedium, and the only reward (besides flavour) is that it balances casters somewhat. I think that ensuring that the warrior is sufficiently capable and limiting spell school access and the number of slots you can dedicate to any one spell are enough in this regard.

Gaining New Spells (p. 40)

I've removed any mention of the caster returning to their master after each level to gain new spells, which is far too much of a setting and campaign assumption for me.

For copying spells, your base chance is 65%, but you apply double your Arc score modifier to this. As such, a caster with an 18-19 Arc only fails on a 1.

The biggest change is that finding a spell does not just grant you the ability to prepare it. I've made it so that mages have only their core spellbook(s), and any outside spells they find or otherwise acquire has to be added to it. One of the things that makes mages at once overpowered and cookie-cutter is making it easy for them to expand their spell arsenal. With unrestricted sharing, even with school restrictions it wouldn't be long before all mages looked very similar, as the party would naturally swap all their spells between them. With this system, the time and expense to copy spells is considerable, so that it's more of a careful choice as to which spells to copy (and when). With this, there is no roll to learn a spell, simply because I didn't see that it served a purpose in addition to the above.

Scrolls (p. 41)

The process for scroll creation is identical to the process of copying a spell from one source to another. Casting from a scroll in combat has an extra speed penalty, a way of rewarding prepared spells (over and above the extra action needed to fetch a scroll out of your scroll case before you can cast it, which is a significant delay). Overall, scrolls tend to be more useful for non-combat spells.

Mage School Progression Table (p. 41)

I let casters start with two spells instead of the traditional one because parties are assumed to be smaller in *Simulacrum*. The rest of the spell slot progression was based on this starting value, and just made to be mathematically pretty from there. Level 5 and 6 spells are gained at a slower rate than those of 1-4, because I wanted to really emphasize that these are some of the greatest magics the world has ever seen. Each level is capped at 6 spells because that's 1/4 of all available spells of a given level (excepting level 6), and I don't want any one mage to be able to be too flexible by themselves, so as to make multiple in a party feel different even when each has a given spell level's slots maxed.

The Schools of Magic (p. 41)

I really like the concept of breaking spells into schools. It helps differentiate spells from a single arcane mass. It also gives specialists in any given school unique playstyles. As I've restricted casters to a maximum of four of the eight schools at first level, it also means that each mage plays differently and grows in a distinct fashion as they level up.

At the same time, this sort of setup only works if, by number of spells available and/or the usefulness of those spells, some schools don't clearly outstrip the other. Unfortunately, that has generally been the case. Evocation, Conjunction, and Transmutation have always been the best schools, with the rest being nice to have but clearly secondary in terms of general utility. These mechanical failings have often been compounded by the tendency of spell creators to confuse fluff with mechanical boundaries: designers have often added spells to the less popular schools that only nominally belong there, fitting only some surface-level aesthetic sense. The worst victim of this has been the Necromancy school, which has been permitted to do almost anything—illusions, summoning, direct damage, and so on—as long as you add some skulls and the words “negative energy” to the spell flavour text (though the Evocation school is a close second). This waters all the schools down conceptually.

In general, I avoided overlap amongst the schools, so that the effects of each remain largely unduplicated.

In the interests of fitting every spell of a given spell level on two facing pages and absolutely no more, I committed myself to a maximum of 24 spells per spell level (three per each of the eight schools). That forced some hard choices. However, it also served to nicely balance out all the schools. If you want to fuck somebody up, you're still going to need Evocation, but it's not the dominant toolkit school that it was.

Spell Details (p. 45)

The usual, except that I've standardized most spell ranges into a fixed short, medium, and long. This makes tracking a lot of spell detail much easier. The standard ranges improve slightly (and consistently) as you level.

I've also given two different areas of effect, so that both theatre of the mind and battle grid players are covered.

Saving Throws (p. 45)

I've seen too many arguments on the nature of illusion spells to let the topic go without comment in the rules. Do they alter reality in any way? Are they like enchantments, which in some way compel or directly fool your mind? Or are they just straight images, for the most part? I've gone with the latter interpretation, so as not to infringe upon the Enchantment school of magic, and have taken pains to explain it all.

Spells (pp. 45-57)

I changed a ton here, and this is the one area that I didn't keep track of everything, so I'll leave this to just note general ideas behind the changes.

I wanted to try and make each spell feel noticeably more powerful as they climb in level. I wanted to preserve the unique niche each school should theoretically possess, but so often doesn't in other implementations of the school system. I wanted greatly shortened spell descriptions, so that it doesn't take all day to wade through a spell listing. I changed every spell to use D6s—no exceptions. Anything that does damage has an Arc save, regardless of the type of effect; this corresponds to a Save vs. Spells in classic editions of the game. All illusion saves are Perception-based, and all Enchantment saves Will-based. Any of the most universe-wrecking spells have been deliberately excluded (such as *Wish*, *Permanency*, *Continual Light*). *Know Alignment* only works against the supernatural, to avoid breaking investigation games. *Identify* is deliberately absent, as I feel it robs some of the, well, magic from the world, while at the same time passing up the chance to actually give the players something to spend their copious amounts of silver on (i.e. the Sage NPC). Many of the formerly-permanent spells that remain are either no longer permanent, or can only be made so via additional costs (*Animate Dead* comes to mind here, in an implementation taken from LotFP).

In general, the save difficulties increase once you reach the fifth-level spells. I wanted a way of making higher level spells more powerful. I also wanted to make it so that most creatures being targeted by them (usually high level/HD creatures at that stage of play, and thus on average having +5/+6 to save) didn't always save vs them, while at the

same time not duplicating third edition's obnoxious caster supremacy in terms of saves.

Spells with a radius are specifically designed to fit on a standard 5e battle grid (21 × 25) because that's the grid that's readily available in stores. As such, they top out at 20 × 20, with the exception of a couple of massive ones.

A few spells were moved around in terms of level, whether because I thought they were badly slotted originally, because other changes made it logical (e.g. folding *Clairvoyance* and *Clairaudience* together made the result far better than *Wizard Eye*), or because I wanted certain effects to be more common (*Water Breathing*) or rarer (*Animate Dead*, *Fly*).

Lastly, there are only six levels of spells because I felt that made it easier to make meaningful shifts in the power level between spells, and because it made spell selection simpler and smaller. This is the way the original edition of the game did things, before any supplements came along.

GM'S MANUAL NOTES

Exploration (p. 6)

For the terminally curious, the standard walk rate per minute comes from "Field Studies of Pedestrian Walking Speed and Start-Up Time," in the Transportation Research Board's *Transportation Research Record No. 1538, Pedestrian and Bicycle Research* (1996), which reported an average young pedestrian walk rate of 4.95 ft per second (297 ft a minute, rounded here to a pretty 300).

Retainer Offer Reaction (p. 89)

I altered the hiring chart to remove the "roll again" result. Why make 45% of all rolls give such a result with no other effect? You're rolling to get a usable result; "roll again" just forces you to waste more time on rolls. I thus folded the roll again results into the Accept column, under the assumption that if someone is for hire then they're looking to get hired. I also changed the 12 result to be a permanent Morale bonus; it was more interesting to me.

As an aside, I thought about converting this table to D20, to allow for a much better granularity with modifiers, but that would break compatibility with modules etc that assign modifiers based on the standard system.

Weather (p. 89)

I greatly dislike weather systems that try to create a dynamic environmental model, as that's not gameable content: it's worldbuilding fluff. As such, even optional as it is, this system only exists to see if something occurs that has an effect on play. It uses a bunch of different die types so that you can grab one handful and roll them all at once

to handle the vast majority of cases with one set of rolls and not mix up the dice.

Encounter Distance (p. 92)

The standard rules give a flat random encounter distance regardless of terrain type or vantage point, tripling if one is outside. I understand the desire for simplicity and the dangers of muh realism, but this was a case where I felt a little bit of granularity wouldn't go amiss.

Indoors, I've gone with $1D4 \times 10 + 20$, which is the very close to the distances used in the original edition of the game. The slight change is to make the room occupied by model deployment + the distance rolled above always fit within the 75 feet available to those using miniature-based combats and the standard 5th-edition battle grid (since that one is readily available commercially). Based on 2nd edition, I've added two different outdoor encounter range categories, so that light woods encounters unfold differently than jungle or lost city encounters. The outdoor distances are fixed to always produce values of 40 feet, because that's a power of five (the unit that a battle map would require, if being used), and 40 feet is also the standard combat move.

There are modifiers for the creatures being viewed being unusually small or large. Lastly, there are modifiers for being higher than the enemy, but this is limited to one step (20 ft up), because the next point at which the viewing distance would double is something like 80 ft up, and if the two parties are vertically that far apart, it's often not really an encounter any longer.

As I'm using standardized combat movement rates whether indoors or out, and haven't increased spell or weapon ranges just for being outdoors as the original game does, I've also kept outdoor encounter distances in feet. The result is simpler, with no meaningful gameplay loss that I'm aware of.

Reactions (p. 93)

I've added a rule making Evil creatures more likely to be unpleasant, and another for Good creatures never to be outright Hostile unless special circumstances call for it.

The unintelligent can't be enthusiastic / actively helpful. It's been suggested that instead of a re-roll for good creature that I just add a roll bonus, but I wanted to avoid making it too likely that an Actively Helpful result is rolled.

I left the Reaction Table as 2D6 for the sake of backwards compatibility (as was the case most times I kept 2D6, a scale I'm generally not that fond of).