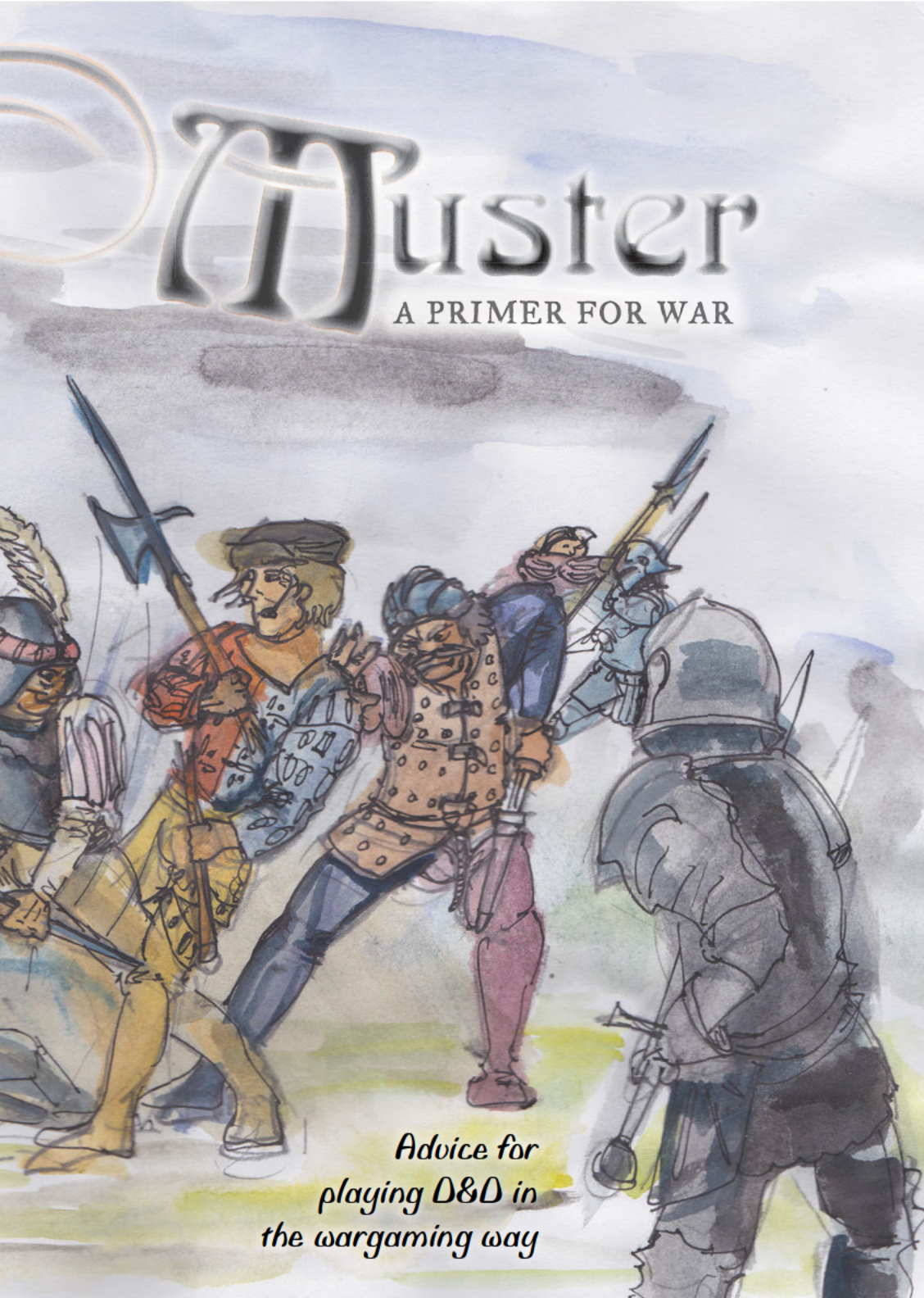
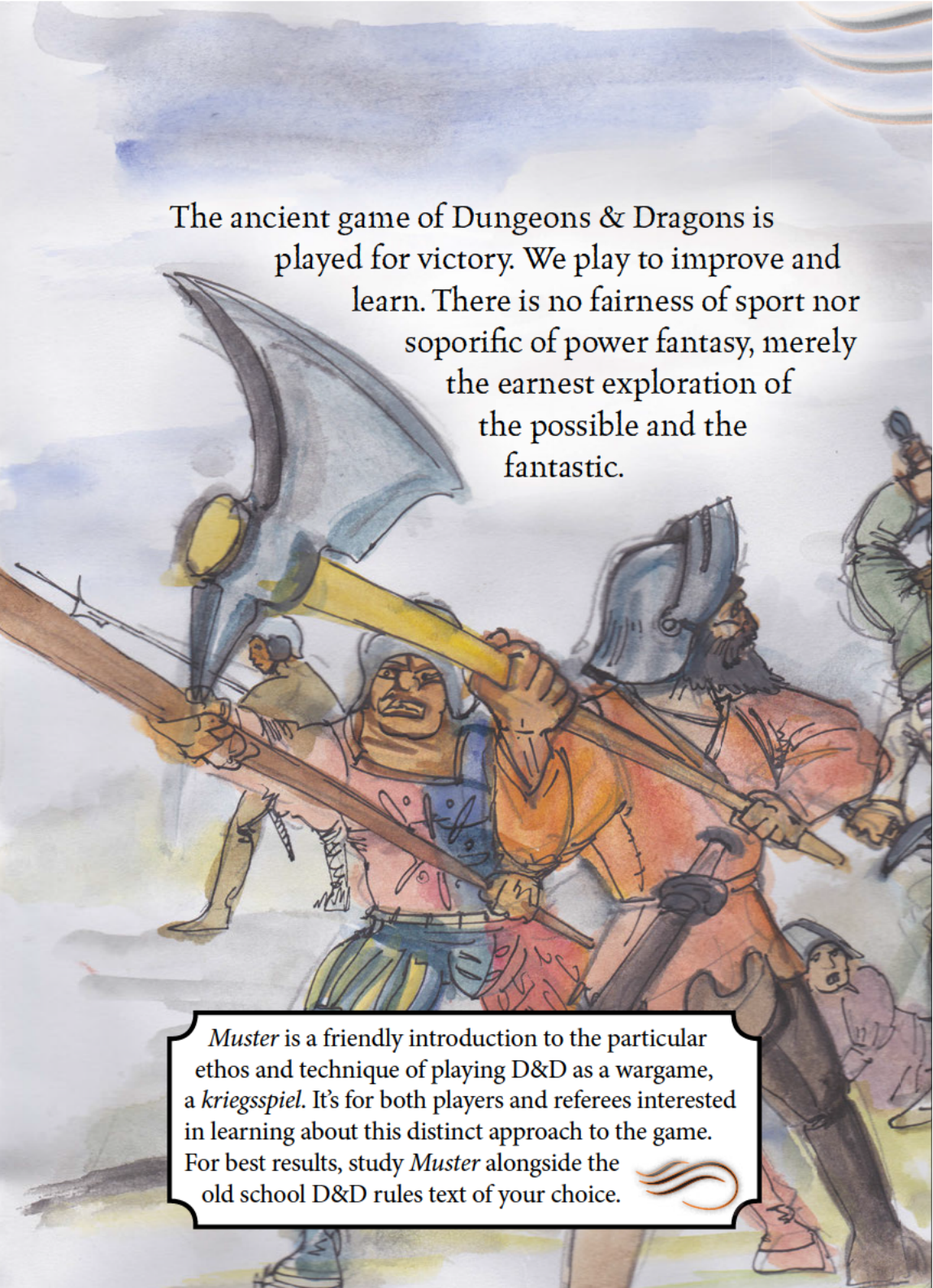
Muster

A PRIMER FOR WAR



Advice for playing D&D in the wargaming way


The ancient game of Dungeons & Dragons is played for victory. We play to improve and learn. There is no fairness of sport nor soporific of power fantasy, merely the earnest exploration of the possible and the fantastic.
Muster is a friendly introduction to the particular ethos and technique of playing D&D as a wargame, a *kriegsspiel*. It's for both players and referees interested in learning about this distinct approach to the game. For best results, study *Muster* alongside the old school D&D rules text of your choice.

Muster

A PRIMER FOR WAR

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Acknowledgments belong to the gamers who've played D&D with me over the last 20 years: the Bextropolis circle, the Iisalmi crew, and most recently the Coup groups. As well ever the Forge for my foundations, the Story Games community for the engagement, and the OSR blogosphere for all the groundwork and perspectives; steel sharpens steel.

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Manifesto

I *was thinking that this might be one of those "big picture first" kinds of topics.* A *print equivalent of the elevator pitch, the manifesto attempts to be interesting and informative in a compact form.* If *you like it, it's easy to print and fold on a single sheet to give out to prospective players.*

And *if you want to learn more, there's still the rest of the book.*

Playing Dungeons & Dragons in the Wargaming Way

; a manifesto

So, you've been asked to play Dungeons & Dragons, the seminal roleplaying game. But there are numberless variants and playstyles out there. What is it even that you do in this game? Here's how to play in the wargaming way.

Challenge proposed

A small commando team enters a magical underworld.

Crack the dream-logic: Observe the environment and apply your knowledge to predict the fairy chess rules of the dungeon reality.

Map the labyrinth: Scout carefully and learn where monsters and treasures are. Choose which doors to open, and which risks to take.

To go on or turn back: As resources dwindle and information increases, you are called to judge expedition goals against the risk of losses, choosing maneuvers to advance or retreat.

A heritage of kriegspiel

D&D is a roleplaying game that is also a wargame. Its philosophical basis is in conflict simulation gaming of the wargaming tradition. The principles we insist upon here are only novel compared to other types of roleplaying games.

Wargaming originates in the 19th century as a hobby and training tool of military men. Its creative ideals are about learning and sportsmanship; we play to understand conflict dynamics, learn culture and science, and grow in the contest.

Although this may often be ignored today, D&D remains one of the high achievements of wargaming. Its subject matter is virtually unique in the field, focusing on myth and legend, conflict with fantastic unknown unknowns, and teamwork on the skirmish scale.

The Three Cornerstones

are the foundation of the way

Neutral referee

The Game Master is a referee; their task is to prepare a challenging scenario and conduct it fairly to whatever outcome. Teaching the rules, and adjudicating the events.

The referee does not have a plan for the outcome of the game. They're not responsible for the outcome, and therefore there is room for players to have agency.

The referee is not an authoritarian master. They are a functionary of the game, not your social superior. You are learning to dance together.

Real achievement

This is a game of skill and daring, played against quantifiable adversity. It's not a theatrical show; you're not playacting inside the Game Master's planned story.

Naturally, this means that losses are real as well. Exhilarating to avoid, depressing to face. But you learn from them because they are real.

Real achievement, real pride, real learning, and real sportsmanship are only possible when the game is real.

Simulation rules

The game is a conflict simulation, its purpose to shed light on how things work; teach reality, use reality. It is not a boardgame, conveniently self-enclosed and fair.

Players maneuver against the imagined scenario and how it should work. The referee exists to apply and adapt the rules to reflect the scenario.

The ideal of simulating a reality, even a fantastic one, is always an aspiration and a compromise between gameability and insight. The game treads a golden mean to capture *anything* real while remaining fun and fluid. The right mechanical tools for the task depend on the group's developing skills and interests.

Some core principles for players

Ask questions about the rules; the referee is responsible for filling you in. **Ask questions** about the situation and game world; the GM is responsible for filling you in. **Ask questions** of the other players; you should conspire together to overcome the scenario.

Do not assume that there is a "right" or "supposed" thing for you to do. It's your job to evaluate the scenario, and **retreat is always an option.**

To be sporting, **play the scenario** rather than rules-lawyering or trying to manipulate the GM. To be a great player, **maneuver boldly** and take the consequences!

Basic Campaign Structure

Quick chargen is paramount, because characters die. A lot.

No backstories, we'll get to know them in time if they survive.

Start at 1st level always, anything else skews perspective.

Character death is a necessity, it is what keeps the game honest.

Use character stables to even out risk and choose suitable characters for different adventures.

XP is goal-based, only granted for success. Treasure, not fighting.

XP is consistent and based on achievement only. No pity points, no simony, no attendance or "good roleplaying" awards.

There is no balance, players call for retreat if they so judge. Not the ref's responsibility.

No cheating; the referee does not have a vested interest in outcomes. There is never a reason to fudge. Rules are operated in the open and on trust.

And some practical advice

Pack torches and water, don't let the expedition fail for lack of basic necessities.

Hire a big party. A good dungeoneering party is like 15 heads strong, and capable of defending itself.

Draw maps, it helps in visualizing the imaginary spaces explored in the game, and the reference material is invaluable over the long term.

Explore and parlay, the game is only a string of combat encounters if you make it that. And then you lose.

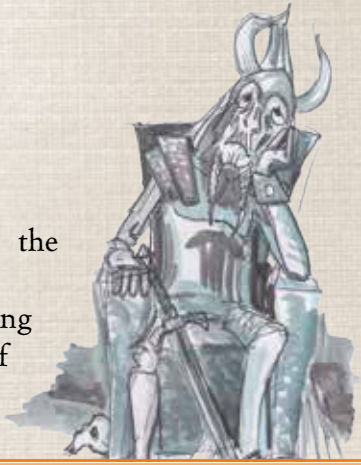
Focus on the situation, not your character. Challenges are overcome by the right moves, not your character build.

A manifesto? Why?

Not everybody knows about the wargaming playstyle, presently the mainstream of tabletop roleplaying pursues different virtues. Hopefully laying the bones out in this way might spark some ideas.

If you'd like to find out more, I also put together a little study guide on this, called Muster; look it up maybe.

Eero



Suitable Rules Texts

Modern D&D is difficult to play in the wargaming way because the culture of the game fights you every inch of the way. The ideas about game balance, charop, and creative purpose of the game are different.

Old school D&D rules from the 1970s and 1980s are generally well-suited, but they're also often confusing and crude, and may be difficult to use for new players.

The royal road to a first campaign is to pick up a more recent "old school" style text such as Labyrinth Lord, OSRIC, OSE, LotFP, or Swords & Wizardry. There are a lot of these; veterans of the form tend to end up writing their own. Just choose one you like the look of to begin with.

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Introduction

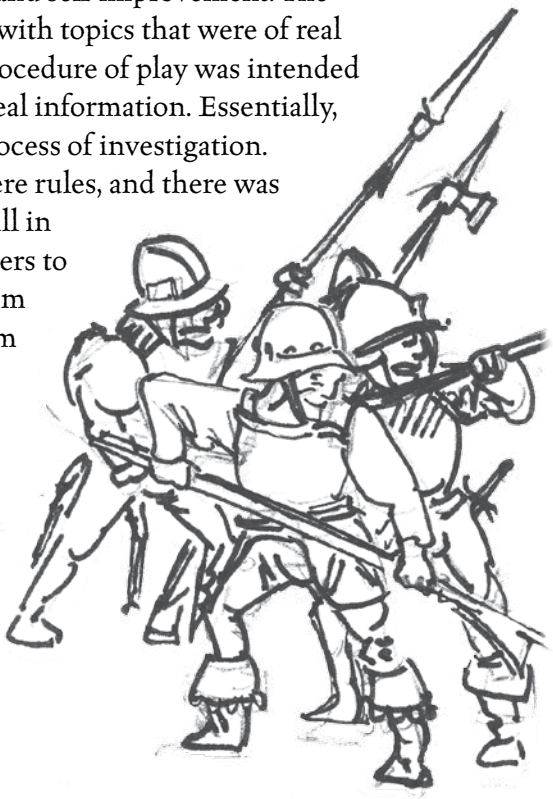
Dungeons & Dragons is a stupendously deep game with a long and varied culture of play. And ever since the beginning half a century back, there have been many different styles of play. I want to tell you about a particular way to understand and approach the game. The subject matter is immensely vast, but I want to be succinct and not get distracted by side paths. To get anywhere fast, we need to focus. First read, then play with new insight, then concern yourself with further study.

I approach the topic from a place of ownership purchased with the coin of authentic practice. Hopefully, it doesn't gnaw on anybody too much to witness me squirting my opinions all over a beloved game and institution. I wouldn't dare if I didn't feel that sense of commitment to the matter.

I will say many things in this book that directly contradict other texts on how D&D should be understood and played. In some cases, it's me earnestly trying to explain it better. In others, it's because I am teaching a different playstyle. And sometimes a prior text is simply wrong. I try to be less wrong, but feel free to correct me in the next round of correspondences.

Wargames are games of conflict simulation that have their roots far in the 19th century, from before anything like a gaming industry. They were among the first "designer games" created by known authors for modern needs. Where other kinds of board and card games were about the elegant interplay of formal rules, wargaming early on discovered a different tack: players could create a **virtual world** and **simulate** its workings. Setting aside ideas of character identification and stories, wargames were the first roleplaying games in the sense of the game occurring inside an imagined arena. The playing pieces in a true wargame are only ever note-keeping and abstractions of the underlying simulated reality that is the main concern of play.

The ideals of wargaming were different from sports and other board games in that the wargame was a tool for learning, teaching, debate, and self-improvement. The game would concern itself with topics that were of real human concern, and the procedure of play was intended to introduce and produce real information. Essentially, the process of play was a process of investigation. There was contest, there were rules, and there was system mastery, but it was all in service of allowing the players to maintain the noble phantasm of simulation and learn from it.



D&D was born as a wargame, from the culture of American mid-century wargaming spearheaded at the game design studio and publishing house Avalon Hill. From the start there were all kinds of creative interests in there; I'm not claiming that this wargaming business is some ultimate cipher for divining the Creator's Intent. But it is one compelling lens that was clearly relevant to the origins of the game.

In my own investigation of fantasy adventure roleplaying I have gone backwards, from modern 21st century D&D towards a more challenge-based fantasy adventure game. My particular motivation has been about striving for a more authentic game that is less about pre-designed content and more about the practitioner at the gaming table: less about following a rules text created by a far-away sage, less about a Game Master being a puppeteer in control. The challengeful adventure game should be about real victory and loss, emergent realization, learning from each other, playing to find out, and creating our own solutions.

Finding out how these latter-day concerns of mine latch onto the old school wargaming culture of early D&D has been wonderful! We're talking about reaching over a cultural gulf of 30 years or so. It took me a while to actually sit down and read something like Keep on the Borderlands (a defining early D&D adventure module), but when I did, it was one of those face-palm moments. "OK, Eero, so clearly there once existed a fantasy adventure roleplaying game that investigated this exact thing, this challengeful adventuring thing, you're trying

to develop. Essentially forgotten and misunderstood by the modern mainstream, too. So maybe study that some more?"

This was around the time in the late '00s when the Old School Renaissance was gathering steam, so it wasn't like learning more was difficult, either. In my own gaming diaries, what I consider my first effort at the wargaming way with a fully mature doctrine happened in the summer of 2011; it was a great creative success locally, and the campaign budded off multiple side campaigns, some of which are still going to this day.

I don't claim that what we'd discovered, this "wargaming way", is the same manner in which others relate to the game, but I do know that it's a very functional and meaningful game to play and worth an introductory text on how to do it.

Basic Outline

Here I've collected basic advice on how to interpret and play the game. It should be useful reading for beginners, and for character players in particular. Get a rules text to read alongside, and think about the way the rules relate to the ideas introduced here.

What it is like

For the grognard, all natural as air. But I'll write for the newcomer here. An outside view of what it is that you're getting into when joining a D&D campaign in the wargaming way.

If you already know how to play roleplaying games, then perhaps pay attention to what is described differently here. Those differences are genuinely significant.

The game is a creative project

Often a new campaign is begotten by a creative primus motor, a **Game Master** type willing and passionate to set up a D&D game. They toil to prepare the scope and concerns of the coming game: things like the literary setting of the game and the specific rules chassis to be used. Also adventure material, or challenges they will present to the play group later on.

Or, there could be an established **group, club, or circle** of dedicated gamers. Long-conniving, they agree upon a scheme to pull together a new campaign. A GM ultimately emerges to hold responsibility for a major creative undertaking, but there will ideally be others: hosts, secretaries, and party leaders.

And players join the group, akin to starting a new band or a movie production, intent on improving on prior attempts and doing it better than last time.

Be mindful of the journey

Be deferential when you join a new game. RPG culture takes a lot for granted, but in reality, there is no one true way, and you should take your cues from senior participants to learn how things are done in this group, at this time.

The GM is always first and foremost a master of ceremonies, their task is to facilitate the game: teach the creative agenda, teach the rules, and advise on how to proceed from moment to moment. If at any point you do not understand something or have any other concerns, ask the GM directly. They are genuinely responsible for the game in the same exact way any club advisor is responsible for apt activity.

Pay attention to the game and your own behavior at the table. Respect is key to being liked, and being liked is the first step to camaraderie.

A well-managed campaign is open to visitors and new participants. Regular attendance is valued greatly, but simply seeing fresh faces is always a treat, so do not hesitate to establish your own terms for participation, even if it's only "occasionally" or "just this once".

Generating a character

Your first task in the game is to generate a character, the playing piece you will use to participate in the game. A fictional adventurer who will brave peril for glory.

In the old school fashion of the wargaming way, this is *generating*, not creating, which makes an important creative distinction from mainstream roleplaying games: in most RPGs of the day, your character is important and heartfelt; a little creative project the player engages in. Not so in the wargaming way: your character is cheap and ultimately disposable, only accruing value through actual survival in actual play.

Consequently, the character generation should be a fairly simple affair, traditionally consisting of little but rolling a stat line (a random line of ability scores created with dice) and selecting the character class (a tactical specialization). Everything else that might come up in a particular campaign is details, gilding the lily that is the random stat line and the choice of class.

Players may entertain themselves at this point by giving names and assigning personalities to their characters, perhaps with some few ideas of who they are and where they come from in the fictional world of the game. This is allowable but not encouraged because these characters are given to death. A player putting emotional work into a character early and eagerly is borrowing sadness. A veteran of the game will extend such affections carefully and over time, once the character proves some penchant for survival.

An adventure is introduced

Once the players have their characters ready, the GM will describe the scenario of the day. You might join an advanced campaign with complicated positioning, persisting from one sitting to the next. Such sessions would typically begin with the GM summarizing the state of the game, and then move on to the regulars organizing a planning debate over how the scenario in play should be developed.

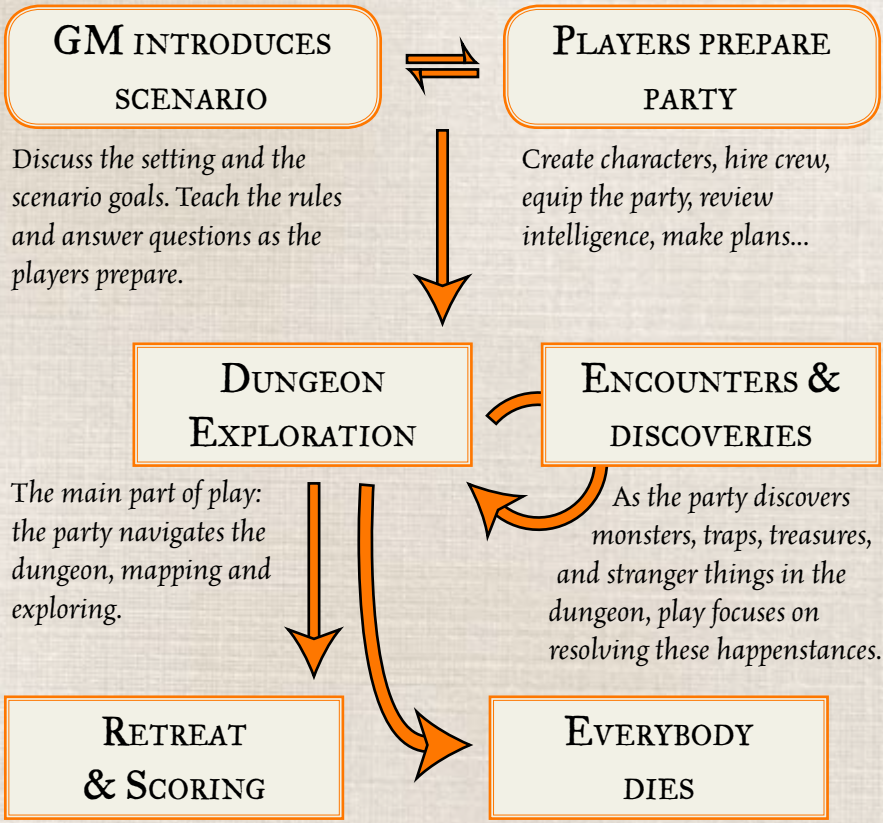
But assuming a basic game, what the GM will tell you instead is the premise of the adventure they have prepared for you. It is going to be a "dungeon", a mysterious location remote from civilization. There is a reason for a party of adventurers to look for this dungeon, often having to do with finding hidden riches or defeating great evil.

The first part of the game concerns planning and preparing your adventuring party for an expedition into the GM's dungeon. The players have each other and their characters, some money to purchase supplies with, and their wits to maneuver in any ways they can think of. Perhaps you will search for rumors and lore, so as to have hints of what awaits you at the dungeon; perhaps you will seek to hire a larger expedition crew; or perhaps you will hasten to the dungeon to see for yourself. The choice belongs to the party.

The GM will help and support you to an extent in making your preparations. If the journey to the dungeon is long and arduous, they will surely remark on the need for food and camping supplies. They will want you to have basic supplies

Basic Session Structure

D&D campaigns are advanced as a regular series of sittings called **sessions**. A typical session length is ~4 hours, although double-length full day endeavors aren't uncommon. A full pace campaign plays weekly, but the basic session is well suited for one-shots and casual pick-up sessions as well...



like torches and weapons, as otherwise there won't be much of a contest between the dungeon and the party. What the GM is not, however, is your manager: that role is claimed by one of the party members, if anybody. Don't expect the GM to make your choices and play the game for you.

Man against dungeon

After the party is prepared and ready to adventure, the GM discusses entrance to the actual scenario. This is when you essentially start playing a wargame, something akin to Chess but for the infinite complexity: the players make moves against the relatively static edifice of the GM's prepared dungeon and its challenges.

There may well be active monsters that maneuver as well, with the GM secretly tracking their actions. But for the most part, the game's basic nature is that of an active adventuring party mounting an assault on the static defenses of a mysterious, fantastic underworld location.

The dungeon's strengths in this contest are many: it has mighty monsters and numbers of minions, and its magical means are an "unknown unknown", with the potential to surprise intruders at any moment. The dungeon is whimsical, but the GM plays fairly: they have notes and records of what the dungeon has and how it uses its means. The GM is there to lift the fog of war in stages, as exploration advances, not to arbitrarily decide what happens.

The adventuring party has its advantages as well: in the basic scenario, you are on the offense, choosing where and how to strike. You may manage to surprise the dungeon denizens. And you have the salve of retreat, which is like the greatest cheat of all: maneuvering cleverly, it's possible to force the dungeon to reveal its cards only to then escape with that knowledge.

Exploration has structure

The formidable challenge of the dungeon is structured by the actual rules of the game: the party maneuvers through the dungeon in exploration Turns (representing 10-minute segments of game time), expending light, water, and other supplies as they map the location and find hints of perils ahead. Doors are discovered, which hide rooms that hold the promise of monsters, treasures, and more.

The adventuring party organizes itself for this phase of play, with one of the players typically taking care of the mapping, another tracking time and supplies, and one acting as the chairman and captain of action, collecting opinions and declaring the party's decisions to the GM.

You often have more than just two or three players, which means that, typically, not everybody is constantly doing things during play. You have the luxury of leaning back and following the action, observing, and thinking. When a noteworthy idea occurs, it's time to stop the action and let the other players know. You're a team, after all, challenging the dungeon together.

Being a good player

The ideal player pays attention to the game situation as it develops; roleplaying games are played largely by speaking back and forth and by taking notes.

However, even better than paying attention is asking questions. Ask to be reminded of some detail that escaped you. Ask for further details. Did the GM tell us what material that door is made of? Does my character recognize these animal droppings?

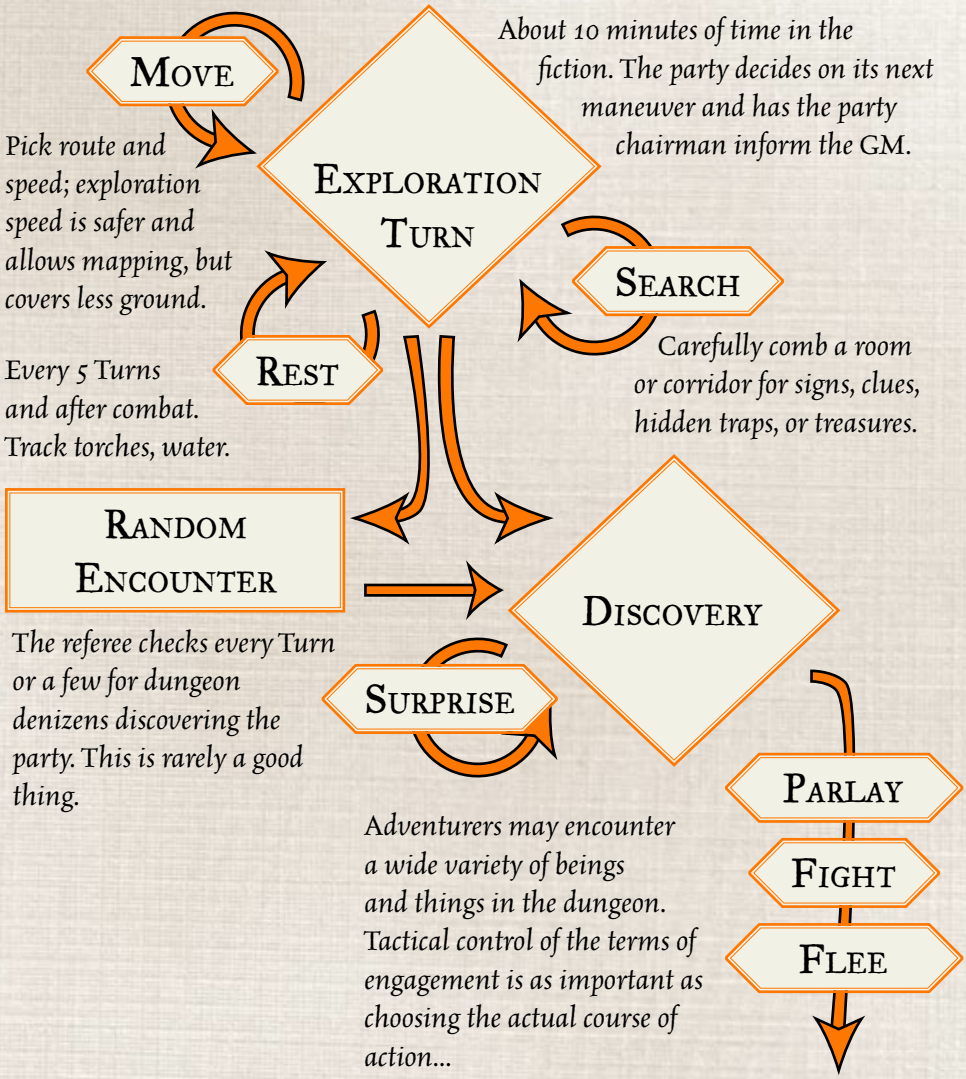
Sometimes the party acts together, and the players debate the best course of action. Sometimes there's no time for debate and a confident player simply declares a course of action that gets followed up by others, or not. And sometimes individual characters take on various tasks.

When it's your time to act, think more in terms of maneuver than playacting. Many roleplaying games are about playacting: we all know what your character will do, the art is in expressing it in a lively way. D&D is not like that: the important thing is that you are aware of the overall situation and that your chosen action is appropriate to it. Nobody cares if you describe your character's action like a good storyteller, what's important is that it's the smart thing to do.

And keep your eyes open for opportunities. This is a very different game compared to boardgames in that there aren't real turns between the players. You can sit for an entire session, for hours on end, without doing anything more than listening to others manage the game. This is in fact

Dungeoneering Procedure

This is the original core part of D&D, the wargaming tech used to resolve the dungeon excursions. It remains playable and exciting without the gild of unique character classes or experience points or tactical combat rules or even free dialogue parlays. A dance of mapping geometry, time, and gambling.



perfectly OK. But don't sit with the expectation that if you sit long enough, somebody will then turn to you and ask you to play your turn. That turn will never come. You're expected to interject when you have something to contribute. Work-group rules, not boardgame.

Adventures that otherwise would lead nowhere are often salvaged by a single good idea coming from a quiet player. This may seem counterintuitive, but it's really quite sensible: the players who are busy managing the party's movement moment to moment don't have the time to think and pay attention to the big picture.

The adventure ends

Ultimately your dungeon adventure will end in one of two ways: in disaster, as some danger of the dungeon claims the lives of the adventurers; or in retreat, as the adventurers conclude that it is time to leave. In the best-case scenario, you leave with your mission accomplished, laden with treasures, or with the kidnapped princess in tow. Often you leave merely alive, which could be considered a kind of inconclusive draw between the adventurers and the dungeon.

This is a game, and games are scored; at the end of the adventure the group counts the extent of their success in the form of "experience points". These points are gained for achieving the scenario's goals; often it is simply bringing back as much treasure as possible. A golden goblet, 150 XP, cha-ching.

Early Game Achievements

The game is vast, and your first focus is watching others to pick up how to play. But after that, ambitious goal-oriented play is best; seize the day!

Successful expedition

Make a 100 GP fortune.

Starter characters are fairly poor by adventurer standards. A single successful expedition can fix that, opening up new options: hire henchmen, purchase equipment, and spend some time preparing for the next expedition.

Gain 2nd level

Get a character to ~2000 XP.

Like picking up a belt in martial arts, it's a formal watershed between the casual and regular. In my experience, it takes 10–20 sessions of trial, error, and skill, excepting the occasional lucky break. The play you perform to achieve 2nd level is all of the D&D that matters, the foundations of low-tier play. Everything else is built on these lessons.

Do everything

Start a character stable.
Retire a character.
Get a retainer.
Become famous.
Ride a dragon.
Declare your Name.

And of course, look for the overarching campaign goal. Often that's just guiding an adventurer as far as they can go, but that's not the case in every campaign.

The points earned from the successful adventure are split between the adventuring party, or the survivors at least, usually more or less evenly. Gaining a few hundred points for a night's excursion is pretty good; gaining a few thousand is excellent.

The goals of the game: to survive and to prosper. Characters who succeed on adventures grow mightier and more famous in the game world, which alongside increasing player skill makes future excursions easier. And when finally the adventurer's thirst for new riches and conquests has been slaked, that's when the game is finally won. To tell the truth, we lose more than we win; it is difficult to survive the dungeon expedition after expedition. Sooner or later even the best players miss a step.

This is it

What is the wargaming way like? Teemu was happy to write up one of his war stories, a sequence of play that the guys still reminisce about years later. I understand that this happened in the late '10s in The Screams from Jedder's Hole, an adventure by Dyson Logos. Let's hear it:

Our prospects of success were, frankly, not very good.

It's been a few years since these sessions, but the gist is that our party of ne'er-do-wells, adventurers, and sellswords had been drafted to rectify the woes of a remote village: a giant hole had opened up in the floor of their church, revealing forgotten catacombs and tunnels from some murky depth of history, and from that hole ensued a strange, horribly enthralling wailing sound. The locals were not too pleased with this state of affairs, so they enlisted the help of whatever riffraff they could find to put a stop to it.

Initial exploration into the catacombs had shown the place to be fairly deadly. Undead horrors and cannibal ghouls took a heavy toll on the first expeditions; it was clear to us that we were outmatched in strength of arm in this place. This was not an unusual state of affairs; the campaign had no pretense of level-appropriate adventures, and it was always up to us, the players, to gauge the risk versus the reward, whether the challenge ahead of us would be too much or doable, and then either abort or proceed. In this case, we chose to proceed.

Despite steadily mounting losses, the explorers finally found the source of the horrid moaning: some massive creature the size of a small house lay in the deepest chambers, singing its horrid scream-song. That was already bad, but the way the beast was located made things that much worse: it lurked in a chamber at the end of a straight tunnel which provided no cover at all for our party.

The situation proved lethal when we first attempted to get close; the monster had long, terrifyingly strong tentacles and would lay into us mercilessly as we approached, picking off some unfortunate frontliner and sending the rest of us fleeing back. Even a short first contact proved to us that there was no hope of getting close without being smashed aside and dragged into the horror's maw.

The survivors fled back topside, and now we had a concrete goal, and also a rather daunting tactical challenge. Even if we managed to get close, how would we kill the nameless beast? It was our group of mortal, fairly mundane adventurers against some horrid abomination that could kill us at its leisure, at the bottom of a very dangerous dungeon, in a tactically untenable deathtrap chamber. We could not get to it, and even if we could, it would likely be able to kill us regardless.

Like I said, our prospects of success were not looking good. However, we had decided to try and were not willing to back off yet. It was our freedom to do either, in this game, but that also meant it was our responsibility to come up with an answer to the problem: our GM would certainly not favor us in any way.

Finally, after much deliberation, the group came up with a plan that was perhaps a bit ludicrous, but at the same time also felt much more feasible and probable than any number of other haphazard ideas that boiled down to "Let's just charge it really hard and hope it can't kill us all." The plan: we would construct a movable wall, and use it to inch forward through the tunnel. The monster could not lash its tentacles at us with the shielding wall, and when we would get close enough, the party could use the wall to shield us as we hurled flaming oil at it. Fire and walls, the two great equalizers of humanity, and we would use both to our advantage here.

The plan took some serious effort. We spent entire in-game days organizing the logistical nightmare, getting new adventurers together to work on the project, hauling the wall into place (after literally sawing it off a barn), setting up winches so we could lower the wall into the catacombs and what have you. But ultimately, we had our technically mobile cover ready to go. The plan seemed a bit ridiculous, and I remember us chuckling at it, but at the same time, it was the best we could manage, and it did not seem to be totally impossible to pull off. We'd find out the truth of it, one way or the other, when we got there.

It was a bit of a miracle when we managed to get our wall moving and down into the dungeon — which is not to say that it wasn't an absolutely miserable amount of work and pain. We needed multiple people to even move the thing, and the monsters in the tunnels smelled our vulnerability during

the task. We lost some of the party to the ghouls, and one more unfortunate ended up awash in burning oil in the chaos.

That kind of thing was more or less par for the course: we'd known already that this plan would likely demand some casualties, and you seldom saw one of these desperate commando operations happening without losses anyway. But the important thing is, we did haul this wall through all those tunnels and into position, next to the tunnel leading into the wailing monster's lair. Now we would begin our approach, safe and sound. Oil was prepped. The strongest among the party secured grips on the wall. We'd gone through all this effort to get things in place. We were prepared, we were determined. Time to move.

The funny thing about battle plans is that you won't know how they will perform until the fateful moment when they are tested. This is a large part of why we even play this game: to discover the proper way to do these things and see whether or not the plan holds in the face of actual opposition. The first contact with the enemy will show you the truth of your designs, for good or ill. And in this case, we quickly found that in that literal first contact, when the monster's tentacles struck our wall, none of us were actually up to the task of holding it up against the monster's strength!

One strong blow, and the whole accursed wall toppled on our own heads, accompanied by panic and screaming! Some were trapped underneath the wall, some scrabbled aside. All turned into absolute chaos and horror when we lost our cover. Tentacles lashed about in the tunnel and smashed

into men. Some fled in panic then and there; others hastily grabbed for burning oil to hurl at the monster in a last-ditch effort to salvage the plan. In panic, most of the jars slipped from trembling hands and broke amidst the chaotic mess, and suddenly everything was on fire — especially all those poor bastards trapped under the wreckage.

The few men who still could, fled screaming into the darkness, haunted by the echoing wails of their companions burning alive under the wall they had labored so hard to carry. Some few survived back to the surface, and at that point, it was clear that we were not equal to this task. We told the locals to cement the hole shut and went on our way. For a man is free to pick his battles, and some battles are simply not worth it.

Sometimes, despite all your efforts and planning, your efforts will come to naught but misery and death in this game we play. That is fine and proper. You may find that your plan was at fault, or that the challenge you have chosen to face was simply too much and your efforts were likely always doomed to failure – or it might simply be that horribly ill luck and some inconsequential details end up being your undoing. But in any case, that is the prospect we accept when picking our battles and facing these challenges: real victory or failure.

Basic Dictums

When setting up a D&D campaign in the wargaming way, these are underlying principles I don't even think about, so fundamental are they. Do not deviate from the dictums frivolously.

Do not cheat or "fudge". The rules should be open and rulings justified. The referee presents challenges fairly and makes unbiased judgments. They do not decide who deserves to win or lose, the process of play does. Dice are played as they fall, and player expectations conform to this reality. Maybe not fair, but always scrupulously just and unbiased.

This means that a lot of characters will die. A lot of adventuring parties will fail. You will only win when a combination of luck and skill is on your side. This is good because the alternative is a theatrical play where the referee hands you victory at their whim.

Start at 1st level. The entire point of the game is to explore the changing landscape of adventure as player characters grow from ordinary people into great heroes. The currency of heroism is cheapened and the terrible stakes of play pre-empted by unearned stature. The game is most enjoyable when you allow player skill and vagaries of fate to dictate.

This means starting new characters at 1st level as well. Even if it means that different PCs have different character levels. Trust me, this works.

And it means not treating the character generation as a creative exercise of great profundity and personal customization. Get that character into play, see if they survive, and worry about knowing their face afterwards.

And it means that the vast majority of the game happens at low levels. The game is not a steady grind towards high levels, the baseline we always return to after failure is at 1st level, and any character advancement beyond that is a glorious exception. A flight that must by necessity come down.

There is no party. The campaign exists as a platform upon which the GM introduces new scenarios, and perhaps for the adventurers to maneuver in between committing to scenarios. It is not a chronicle of the lives and deeds of a specific group of adventurers, a specific party. Parties are formed as necessity dictates, often anew at the beginning of every session of play.

The implication is that you do not need a stable set of participating players week to week. You don't need for their characters to always remain the same. It is OK for characters to die and be replaced, it is OK for a player to manage a stable of multiple characters. If the paladin doesn't want to join a morally grey adventure, the player can make another character who will.

This does not mean that there cannot be continuity, just that it is not a mandated default state of the game. If the players manage to form a lasting company that adventures together from scenario to scenario, good for them.

Wargaming Way Wall Wisdom

Some saws to lay on your dojo walls.

Three Cornerstones

Neutral referee	**Simulation play**	**Real achievement**
No fudging	*Rulings, not rules*	*Players win and lose*
Dynamic balance	*Rules are cruft*	*XP is real score*
Hygienic procedure	*Teach reality, use reality*	*Learn sportsmanship*
Authentic participation		*Learn about stuff*

The dogmatic definition of the wargaming way, if you will. The three cornerstone principles seem to apply to the entire tradition of free kriegsspiel.

Party Management

Quick character creation
Start at 1st level
No backstories
Characters die/retire
Use character stables
Use hirelings and retainers

Simulation Model

Realistic baselines
Random starting stats
XP is goal-based
Leveling models heroic stature
Geometric level progression
Linear HP gain
Sublinear damage gain

The setting has real baselines. That is, the campaign has a consistent understanding of how recurring elements are simulated mechanically: ordinary soldiers have 1d6 hit points; climbing a tree requires a DEX check; ghouls have 2 HD. These conventions do not depend on the character levels of current adventurers or GM opinions about how difficult a situation should be to make an exciting adventure; they are what they are regardless of human desires.

Baselines are so important because they form the context for the heroic advancement so prominent as the subject matter of D&D. Characters and their power relationship to the mundane reality of the setting really do change, but that can only hold true if you abjure all the mechanical trickery embraced by more theatrical roleplaying games and let the setting be fixed to specific mechanical constants.

XP is scrupulously goal-based. This means that experience points, the scoring device of the game, are not earned at the referee's whim, or for just showing up, or for good roleplaying, or for participating in an exciting scene. Only real play by real players, leading to success in the adventure, deserves points.

This does not mean that XP can only be awarded for looting treasure from dungeons; the game has the potential for more varied scenario goals. But it does mean that game events are not what gets scored; intentional achievement of goals is.

Taking the XP scoring seriously is important for making the game fun for the same reasons sports take scores seriously: it's how you see who's winning, and how much.

Players seek to gain points. The game has a clear victory condition (survive and gain XP), and that shouldn't be obscured by lofty stylistic ideas like "roleplaying well". Sportsmanship decorum is paramount, of course, but knowing what gains points and why is such a valuable orientation tool for play that nothing should come in its way.

This means that the scoring rules are public and known. And it means that players should generally make the best moves they can; if this flouts established character personalities or fog of war, put rules into place to regulate such instead of guilt-tripping players about playing the game for points.

Play is authentic. The GM prepares goals, situations, opposition forces, and terrain of maneuver, not plotlines or scenes, and certainly not outcomes. Events are resolved by rules that model those events, not bias or preconception about how things are "supposed" to go.

This means that the players choose their maneuvers based on the presented situation, not the genre tropes of dungeon fantasy. If your play resembles historical D&D, it is because you come to the same conclusions, not because you're aping the past.

This also means that failure is as precious as victory because whatever happens, it is real in the sense of really arising from what we, the players, are doing. We're not the audience, we're the doers, even when the doing goes hilariously wrong.

Dynamic balance. This is a key antidote to game balance: the referee does not have to worry about whether the adventure is too easy or too hard to be meaningful for play if the group can negotiate and adapt to the challenge.

The way to dynamic balancing is to discard the concept of fixed GM-prepared encounters. The challenge emerges from player choice to interact and commit to maneuvers, not from the GM's plans. The GM sets a monster, but it is the players who choose whether engaging it is worth the risk. Retreat is always an option.

And, as a corollary: if something is easy, trivial, not gameable due to lack of challenge, it is fit for passing over, resolving by summary process. Do not waste your playtime on the irrelevant, go find the challenge.

Players lead the game. The GM-referee usually prepares the stage by instructing on how to prepare the party, and by introducing the initial scenario. But after that, they lean back. "This is the situation. What will you do next?" That is the crux of the game, the game entire.

This means that the referee is not responsible for pacing the game: that is on the party leader. They are not responsible for the direction: that is on the party deliberation. They are not responsible for fun and excitement: if you want that, make fun and exciting moves. The referee is there to resolve events, not to worry about the game being fun.

And it also means, again, that the players have a real hand in the events in the game: real decisions, real victory, and real

loss. The referee is far too neutral, unbiased, and process-oriented to worry about *outcomes.*

Resolution models reality. The game's resolution processes are value-neutral and unbiased, with no "PC privilege" or "GM fiat". The rules and rulings are based on an earnest attempt at fair modeling of real phenomena; gameability as a concern comes on a different layer of the game, the modeling should look boldly at what is true rather than what is convenient.

This means that preparing the game and becoming better at the game is a scholarly journey in real learning. It does not need to be overly ambitious, but to whatever detail you model, model the game setting as it is.

Many important parts of the game are fantastic, but that does not somehow release us from the ideal of being concerned with modeling reality. Firstly, we model the fantastic diegetic reality of the game, not necessarily our own; secondly, fantasy and magic have their own rules and principles in cultural history of religion and myth, available for modeling.

Rulings are sincere. The underlying procedure of resolution is a spot ruling made by the referee; as play develops, they choose the individual rules and mechanical conceits that are used to resolve events in the simulation. They serve honestly, openly, and ultimately at the pleasure of the group as a whole.

This means that whatever rules you end up using in the game, you are doing that of your own will. And if the group

has disagreements over how the rules should be, they come to an agreement like human beings.

And that, in turn, means that the referee should, when challenged, be able to explain every rule. The campaign holds its own authority within.

Rules are cruft. That is, the written game text you have can only ever be documentation of the process of play from some past campaign. It cannot possibly be an authoritative basis for your own play because elevating it as an authority removes the play group's authentic wargaming duty to *actually model* the scenario; to model is to take intellectual responsibility, and you cannot do that if you elevate Rules As Written above your own honest opinion.

This does not mean that reading rules texts is not useful. It just means that treating those texts as anything but suggestions and inspiration is an unhygienic pattern.

1st Dungeon Doctrine

At this point, it's probably fairly clear that the game is about developing and performing the skills — or hilarious lack thereof, as the case may be — of warcraft, or using a more modern term, military science. Perhaps it's time to consider the practicalities of that.

Understand the Question

The number one failure I see in practical dungeoneering is players not understanding the question: it is very possible to play the game without even realizing that you are supposed to be thinking smartly and making wise decisions. For example, players may believe that their job is to simply go along with the referee's suggestions and experience the content that's been laid out for them, like the game was a movie. They may think that the most important thing is to "roleplay" their character as a funny or realistic personality. But if all you care about is pretending to be scared of goblins, you're not even playing the actual game.

Fight those inclinations! Trust in the authenticity of the game. Assume that when confronted by a dungeon door, it *really is* up to you to choose whether to open that door. Such a simple and basic choice, one that arguably chooses between playing or not playing, and I still advise you: you should make it on a strategic basis. So get up from that ironic daze, seize the

day, and really put your brain to work: is it in the best interests of my adventurer to take this action? If not, why not?

Players who engage in the game are rewarded with **doctrine**, the crystallized conclusions of their own experience on how to best go about conquering dungeons or other kinds of adventures. Over time the development of doctrine makes maneuvering easier and deeper, as you can focus on more complex emergent problems instead of the basic ones.

Doctrine Examples

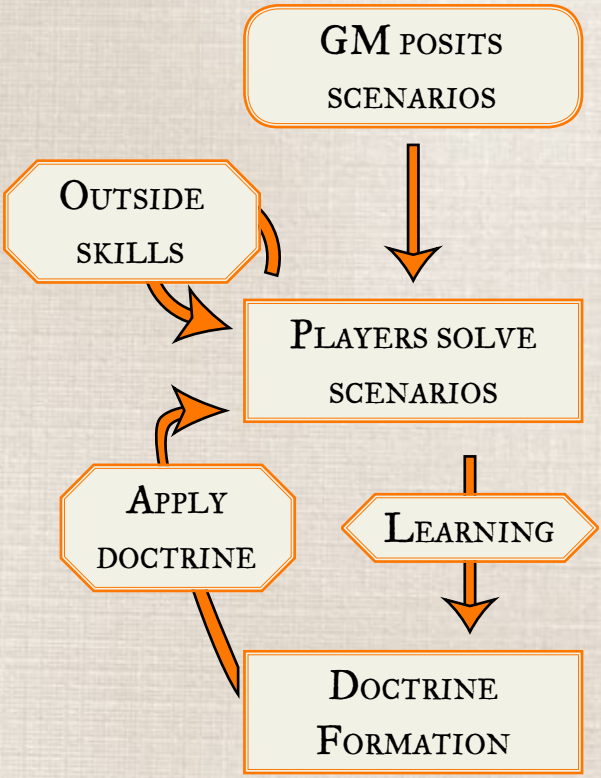
Some examples of basic lessons that I like, confident that they should apply across campaigns, wherever traditional dungeoneering is practiced. This is the kind of common sense learning that atomic tactical doctrine consists of:

Always check the ceiling.
Get a lantern if you can.
Scout slowly in unknown dungeons.
Appoint a leader, and obey them.

When constructing your own doctrine, pay attention to the idea of "best practice": these kinds of ideas about what you should or shouldn't do in the dungeon are valuable not because they somehow guarantee success, but because all other things being equal they're likely to be a better idea than the alternative, as demonstrated by experience. Often good doctrine is outright tactical free gain: the hard-won lessons of history about how option A is strictly superior to option

Doctrine and Skill

This is the actual fun part of wargaming, where you try to learn from experience and formulate principles for future contests.



There is glory and pride in succeeding in the game, yes, but the intellectual satisfaction of forming a well-considered "playbook" for dungeon commando operations should not be underestimated.

B, so you should forget about B entirely. Like checking the ceiling; why would you want to not do that, when doing it avoids having a giant spider drop on you?

Usually, it's as challenging to establish good doctrine as it is to know what ideas are good in the first place. I often see very experienced dungeoneers going with the flow, letting their allies make old mistakes, or even getting swept into them themself. You could save each other some pain by talking about doctrine and sharing your wisdom. Setting aside a bit of time to talk about lessons learned, perhaps at the start and end of sessions, is a laughably facile way to improve your play!

Party Roles

It's a good idea to organize the adventuring party with specialized roles; it helps the players focus, gives everybody something to do, is fun, and improves overall performance. Often roles carry doctrine by their mere existence.

The best way to appoint roles is by player interest: let active players gravitate to operate the party. One of the big strengths of D&D as a social activity, compared to some other roleplaying games, is that it's completely fine for individual players to take fairly passive roles, letting others do most of the playing.

The second virtue of party organization is, of course, letting the roles revolve. Everybody should get a chance to try their hand at different things over time, that's how we grow. But setting artificial scheduling doesn't work well.

The important roles in my experience:

Party leader, also called the caller or the captain or the chairman, is the player who manages group discussion, gathers opinions, formulates decisions for the party to vote on, and passes party maneuvers to the referee. A party doing this job badly makes bad decisions, is confused, and plays slowly. A party with a good chairman sets game direction efficiently and makes things happen together, truly matching the referee as an equal source of direction for the game.

Mapper, often the party scout, is the player who queries the referee about the dungeon architecture and maintains the party's tactical situation image. Often the mapper deals with the concrete back-and-forth about party scouting and movement with the referee, asking questions and making sure they understand the dungeon description correctly.

Quartermaster or party sergeant or logistics officer is the player who tracks the party's supplies (torches, water, etc.), keeps track of time for the party's benefit, maintains loot lists, and micromanages the hireling contingent of NPC allies. They answer the regular game-state questions about party composition, lightning situation, marching order, and so on.

There are other roles that groups sometimes develop, and you can split or combine roles depending on what kind of personnel the group has to put up, but I think that filling those three slots is the ideal base to start from. Not necessarily in a doctrinaire way, insisting on formal task distribution, but in a way that ensures that all the tasks get managed effectively.

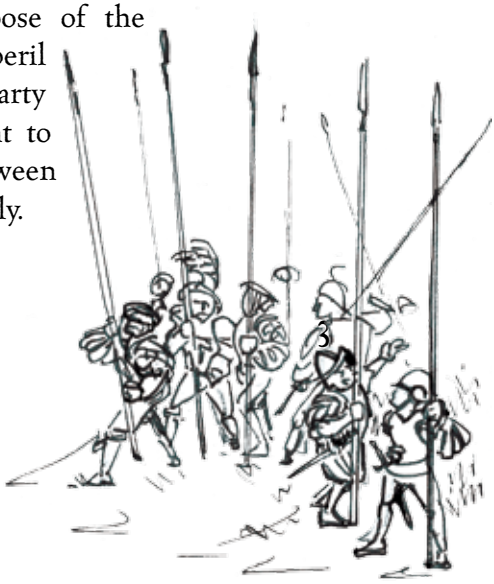
Basic Scouting Doctrine

A small party in an unknown dungeon should default to the use of a single scout traversing the dungeon ahead of the main party. The scout stays at least 10 feet ahead of the actual front line of the marching order and strays no further than voice carries. This is the "near scouting" paradigm, contrasting with long scouting, a different technique you might sometimes wish to employ.

The scout (and the party following them) should proceed at mapping pace, slow enough to spot dangers and opportunities in the dark caves and to make notes. They should use the minimum amount of light they need, moment to moment, so as to not attract attention.

The scout should make sure that the referee knows that the scout always checks all directions when advancing, including the ceiling. They will stop and carefully examine suspicious architecture such as holes in the walls. They take breaks to maintain alertness and allow the party to catch up at regular intervals.

Many dungeon threats can be preempted by the use of scouting. Ultimately the purpose of the scout is loss management: a peril may claim the scout, but the party lives on. The party might want to cycle the scouting duty between adventurers to share the risk fairly.



Light Discipline

Left to their own, players will often disregard the lighting conditions of the dungeon, which may leave them open to dangerous referee penalties in situations where light matters the most. Forewarning monsters, missing subtle clues, combat penalties, and outright loss of illumination are very possible.

The party should train to move from full lightning conditions to low light and back quickly, extinguishing torches and covering lanterns as necessary. The party should look to have the best illumination possible; lanterns instead of torches, magical light even.

Several party members should carry light sources to reduce confusing shadows, improve the general level of illumination, and reduce sudden confusion when the light-carrier is in the wrong place at the wrong time. In a small party, everybody carrying their own torch is not excessive.

Make sure that when the referee asks about the lights in combat, you in fact have sufficient illumination being maintained. It is absolutely a legitimate way to die in dungeon hell by having everybody throw away their torches to draw their weapons the moment battle is joined, plunging the situation into darkness that benefits only the monsters.

Make a point of bringing the light alongside any characters engaging in search, study, or other subtle observation of dungeon features. Incomplete lightning is a completely unnecessary reason to fail to discern important details.

Room Entry Doctrine

Parties die because players do not agree upon and train organized action. Make sure in advance that the players know what each squad member is supposed to do when a dungeon door gets thrown open. Train two different entry methods:

Hard entry is used when you suspect that there are hostiles inside the room, and wish to seize the initiative and control the situation quickly and decisively. The party arranges around the entrance, bashes it in, and charges the room in a planned pattern of entry. This is the best entry if you are on strategic offense and there are enemies in the room. If there is a trap in the room, a hard entry is not good.

Soft entry is used when you don't wish to initiate hostilities or suspect traps. The party arranges to defend their position in the corridor outside the door (sufficient distance at first in case of traps), opens the door quietly, observes, and sends the scout inside. If battle results, it is fought defensively at the chokepoint of the doorway. The soft entry should be used whenever the hard entry is not indicated.

The worst entry is a confused one, of course; it loses against both a monster room and a trap room. Dungeoneering involves a lot of situations where the party has the initiative, with the door to the unknown waiting for them to open it. At least have the decency to coordinate that part; you're going to open hundreds of doors in D&D, not getting a coherent doctrine down for that would be just sad.

Combat

A small party should plan to fight defensive skirmishes in the dungeon; you're not trying to win, you're trying to cover the retreat. Choose the vanguard of the marching order accordingly.

A more powerful party would figure out their own fighting formation for dungeon warfare; I won't go into the details here, but the spear phalanx has long reigned in low-level dungeon tactics as a dominant force. Work it out yourself.

It is particularly useful to be aware of the fact that the dungeon fantasy fluff that penetrates modern visions of D&D is largely stylized storytelling rather than practices borne out of actual play; it's fantasy authors and visual artists imagining what bold fantasy combat looks like, there is no particular authority to be had in that when you're figuring out how things work out for yourself. Furthermore, such role models are nearly without exception what the modeling would consider mid-tier; not applicable when figuring out tactics for low tier gameplay. So maybe don't take your cues for what works and how to act from popular fantasy movies or storybooks.

Develop party organization with in-combat coordination in mind. Agree upon signals for attack and retreat, work out the support elements (illumination, corpsmen, etc.), and have a tactical chain of command.

Adventuring parties are often defeated because they lack discipline. It is particularly dangerous when part of the party

breaks ranks to escape, leaving the rest to die against the overwhelming enemy. Probably the single most important thing to do would be to somehow coordinate the decision to retreat, and learn to do it in a good order that gives everybody a chance to get out of a bad situation alive.

And, the implication for the referee

Yes, the doctrines I advise are good ideas at my own table, when I'm refereeing. And the only thing maintaining interoperability between our campaigns is the simulative refereeing process, both of us earnestly looking at the facts on the ground — the game situation — and ruling on what matters and what doesn't. So maybe we both come to similar conclusions about some more obvious matters, but also to different conclusions about others.

Sometimes you care about some tactical detail that I do not care about, and sometimes vice versa. This does not mean that doctrine is worthless or "subjective", just that a player is wise to apply outside doctrine with care in a new campaign. Test things out, and see what works. I'm not trying to give guaranteed tricks here, just to illustrate the scope of the actual questions that dungeoneering gameplay in D&D offers. To actually play the game is to ponder on these practical matters.

The Bumblebee Bandit

Story time again! I'll try to capture the feel of playing D&D as a wide-open refereed adventure game. No designed plot, just organic developments and challenges that lead to victories and failures. Plus, a quick look at one type of wargaming scenario outside the basic dungeon.

In the summer of 2011, our "historical campaign" had been running for 10 sessions. We'd already managed to get a fair number of adventurers killed in the Tomb of the Iron God, Temple of the Ghoul, Tower of the Stargazer, and a few side quests, learning the game. Some characters had fortune and skill on their side and had made noticeable dents in the XP thresholds of their respective classes, looking hungrily towards the 2nd level.

The party ended up traveling to the somewhat out-of-the-way town of Pembrooktonshire upon some flimsy excuse, might have been simply a general attempt at combing for new adventure hooks. I maybe hinted to the players that I-the-GM would have some amusements on hand if they chose this particular tack on the map. (It's been a while, memory fails.) What the players didn't know was that said town is the stage for the urban adventure anthology No Dignity in Death: Three Brides, by Jim Raggi. Urban adventures are a challenging expert form of D&D that differs a fair bit from

the more common dungeon adventures, and this was to be the campaign's first encounter with such.

The first "bride" of No Dignity, the Small Town Murder, is as straightforward a murder mystery as can be, involving a marriage feast and the sudden violent death of the bride herself. As this type of adventure does, it requires the players to use basic investigation skills to form a suspect pool, interview witnesses, pinpoint the criminal, and expose them. There's a fairly sizable cast of NPC personalities involved in the big wedding, but fundamentally it's a basic investigation scenario.

The players had no tactical doctrine whatsoever for how to even begin to solve murder mysteries aside from whatever exposure they had to literary depictions, Sherlock Holmes and the like, which meant that we were likely to see a fair bit of inefficient fumbling and little results. The immediate parts of the scenario mainly involved taking in exposition and learning some basics about the involved NPCs: families of the bride and the groom, whomever else happened to pass across the referee's narration of the situation.

Unlike dungeoneering, which the campaign was developing some routines for, the adventurers showed little inclination to the kind of note-taking and systematic investigation that solves investigation scenarios. I didn't really have much more of a sense for it myself as the referee at the time, but I settled down with the expectation of a lengthy bout of failure. If I was redoing this today, I'd actually introduce murder mystery wargaming to the players more consciously instead of just

throwing them in the deep end (of an admittedly beginner-friendly scenario).

Part of the maneuver terrain of Small Town Murder is that the adventurers have a rival crime investigator in the form of the Knight of Science, Tiberius Tucca. Said gentleman arrived on the murder scene to bluster and bombast, very ready to accuse the obviously set-up gypsies for the bloody deed. No need to investigate when you're the blowhard stock antagonist character.

So the players had the field, what to do next? Sipi had a clever and proactive idea; fairly literary and therefore not necessarily viable, but absolutely better than doing nothing. The party would forgo investigating what seemed like a terribly convoluted mess of motivations and alibis, moving directly to exposing the murderer instead!

Sipi's character, a Fighter named Hans Krüger, was something of a party leader here, so he had no trouble convincing the other adventurers to follow his lead: because the Knight of Science was *obviously* the murderer (under the principle of being the least likable character so far introduced, I guess?), the party should get up into his face and pretend really hard that they'd already solved the crime and would bring it to the local sheriff in the morning. I think there were some vague hints at a found diary or something of the sort, too.

A reader familiar with the literary genre of crime investigation knows what this is supposed to achieve: the murderer would, provoked like this, attempt to silence the adventurers overnight in a desperate bid to avoid being

exposed to the sheriff. I feel like this is a common enough plot conceit that it has a name somewhere. A bit of a trope in crime fiction. But would it work in a wargaming context?

The players staked their investigation on the Knight of Science being the murderer, on the strength of gut instinct (or reading the ref, if you prefer). As it happened, adventurers were terribly lucky here: the murder had actually been committed by Faustius Germanicus, the squire of the knight. A character barely mentioned so far as somebody who exists. And, most importantly, somebody who was right there listening to Hans's covert social manipulation play as he tried to draw the knight into a trap.

The events that night at the inn where the adventurers were staying were fairly ludicrous, as Bumblebee Bandit, a literary character only known from penny dreadfuls to adventurers who passed their INT checks, popped in to visit Hans and friends, who were expecting a nocturnal assassination attempt. Why Bumblebee Bandit? Well, that's a whole *thing* in this meticulously prepared murder mystery adventure. The bride's father runs a printing house currently working on the newest installment of the Bumblebee Bandit trash literature, the knight's squire is a huge fan, hangs out at the publishing house all day long to read the manuscript, falls in love with the daughter of the printsman, has delusions of grandeur...

The players of course had missed all of this, because who needs to actually interview witnesses or, well, investigate anything. Just get to the spot, claim loudly to have solved the crime, and retreat to wait for the murderer to show themself.

The damnedest thing is that Hans managed to intuitively (relying on the player's social and cultural skills, basically) phrase his narrative of "imminent reveal" in a credible light despite directing it at the wrong person. Good show, clap of hands.

So the adventurers confronted the Bumblebee Bandit, literally closed the window after he entered into the room. Convinced he's the Knight of Science still until they managed to unmask the ferociously resisting man, discovering that he was none other than Faustius Germanicus the squire. (Who the what? — well, learn to investigate...)

As often happens in chaotic D&D combat simulation, Faustius managed to fumble his way out of the inn despite the adventurers being prepared for him, and attempted to ride away into the dark. The players were delighted when Hans finalized his murder mystery hero play by managing to ride down the fleeing Bandit, like a boss. I was quite certain that the squire had gotten away when he managed to finagle himself out of the inn, but no; dogged determination and dice decided otherwise.

A funny afterword to the entire affair was when the adventurers decided to give their captive up to the Knight of Science, a sort of federal police officer vs. the more local sheriff that Pembrooktonshire also enjoyed. Faustius must have been fairly intimate with the buffoon, as a dice roll indicated that he actually got to escape from custody. Perhaps the knight wished to save himself the embarrassment of a trial against his own squire. Well, no matter for the heroes

of the day: the adventurers were rewarded surprisingly well by the gypsy family they saved from the whitey's justice by uncovering the real, and now outlawed, murderer.

All this happened in a single session of play, it ended up being a very compact adventure in that regard. Sort of a "what if we just smoke them out?" dungeoneering side-step, except in the murder mystery scenario type.

In an extended grand campaign of D&D nothing ever truly ends, of course, so the story has its own farcical epilogue. Let's see:

Hans Krüger was a rising star of adventure in the campaign after leading his party to victory here. He went on to entangle in The Great Games of Pembrooktonshire, the "second bride" of No Dignity; taking the place of one of the participants on the strength of the party's fresh reputation. Winning glory, Hans landed a marriage with the daughter of a wealthy local carpet factory owner. This led him to travel in Amsterdam after some Persian carpet-making secrets, new adventures, and ultimately starting his own mercenary company funded by his new father-in-law.

In session #84 of the campaign, over 70 sessions since Faustius Germanicus escaped into the night, he popped up again to bedevil our adventures! Hans, by now a 6th level Fighter/Duelist, was completely enmeshed in the emperor's Italian Wars when his entourage stumbled on Faustius leading a group of outlaws in the backcountry of Ferrera. Faustius, a 2nd level Fighter himself at this point, wasn't the

happiest about being reality-checked a second time by Hans. This second encounter proved inconclusive as well, I think, with neither party willing to really press the issue. As far as I know, Faustius is still pursuing his dream of being a glorious, heroic outlaw in the vein of the Bumblebee Bandit.

D&D and Chauvinism

We've pretty much gone over what I think of as the basic introductory material to D&D; the back half of Muster will be more in the advanced vein, addressing practicalities that are of interest to referees and veteran roleplayers.

Before moving on, though, I'll say a few words about a topic that is coming to bedevil D&D more and more over the years. From past experience, I know that this is terribly offensive to some, but nevertheless, I don't quite feel like I should write a primer for how to play D&D in this day and age without addressing the gulf of history between us and Gary Gygax.

This is also it

The typical D&D campaign is always firmly rooted in the traditions of adventure fiction, a genre of literature with deep origins in 19th-century colonialism, orientalism, racism, and authoritarianism. This is not helped by the early authors and the original publisher, **Tactical Studies Rules** (more commonly just TSR), collectively arising in the 1970s from a fairly conservative, very American background.

The game built on this grounding is not *intentionally* a vehicle of colonial attitudes and values, but those fundamental values were shared by the authors and they form the basis of what the game is. Observe:

Adventurers are white: I don't mean just literally white-skinned; D&D adventurers are part of the locally dominant civilization, enjoying its amenities and support. They are fully recognized by the law of the land in their activities. They enjoy strategic initiative and advance scouting, generally being on the attack and knowing where to go.

Monsters are natives: Whatever the specific stories told in the campaign, it remains the ground fact that Gygaxian Evil Humanoids are mainly primitive, literally cave-dwelling groups far behind the adventurer civilization in sophistication. They possess the universally attributed features that a dominant culture ascribes to a marginalized ethnicity: brutal, emotionless, unintelligent, in the grips of Evil.

Adventuring is conquest: Adventurers do not knock when they come into your home. Adventurers will kill you for your treasures, neither active possessions nor grave sites are safe. They will take it as an affront if you obstruct passage or defend your property. You do not have a recourse in the adventurer's native court of law; everything he does to you is legal.

That's not some caricature, I'm just describing what D&D says, in very bare and technical terms: it is a wargame that simulates the practical conduct of a filibuster expedition between communities in a state of constant war. I could say similar things about the nature of race war, exoticization of the unknown, and many other things, but the gist is simple: D&D is thematically the same as western adventure literature

of the 20th century. It picks up the challenge of being "Tarzan: the roleplaying game", and runs with it.

It is important to understand that the game's historical culture absolutely does not intend this as some kind of direct analogy to historical conquistadorialism. There is no crypto-KKK going on (as far as I know, and I do know a bit). But it is also true that the game does not *accidentally* glorify heroic adventures in a mythical past where men were heroes and there were monsters to slay. It is a macho, patriarchalist piece of cultural tradition, borne of the notion that learning to wage war is an inherently amusing pastime, and studying ways for a heroic "us" to put down the monstrous "them" is a noble pursuit.

Us humans, we love stories of heroism. But with the cultural distance from the origins of D&D growing larger, the glory intended to be earnest wears thin and satirical for many. It gets patched up; for example, moving the focus of the game from dungeon filibuster to the conduct of a Great Rebellion against Bad Guys makes it instantly more palatable to the current audiences, all without changing the game's structural nature that much.

This is a topic that's been talked about a lot in the hobby, and I encourage you to seek out different perspectives. For the longest time in the TSR era, it used to be that corporate D&D was published and written about in a very carefully infantilized way, some real Comics Code stuff: "law enforcement officers dying as the result of activities of evil is prohibited" and so on. That's... it is one worldview's perception of what is important, what to guard against in developing the game. It makes sense

if you think that adventure literature is great as long as we make it very clear that Heroes only kill Bad Guys.

Later on, it has become fashionable to sanctify the game by token acknowledgment of the importance of inclusiveness and identity politics. The game will be all right if we make sure that the adventurers are more diverse than they used to be, and if it's generally very clear that the "us" is inclusively everybody who wants to join, and "them" is very, very fictional and monstrous.

But it is still an "us" attacking a "them" with various justifications that make sense to the current audiences. It is still a game where violence solves problems and brings rewards. It is a wargame, a heroic fantasy, or at the very least an echo of one.

What to do about it

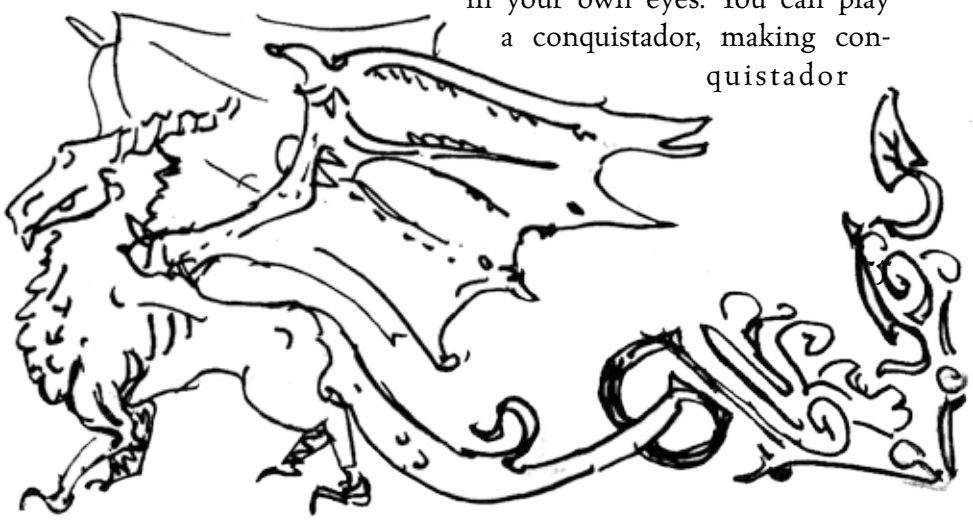
I don't have all the answers about how the microcosm relates to the macrocosm, but speaking from personal convictions: I simultaneously think that it is important to understand ourselves and our history, and it is equally important to come to the ultimate conclusion that heroism is a human fantasy: it is a story we tell ourselves, one of many stories we use to make sense of a complex and chaotic world.

So the reason we find meaning in D&D is, yes, that it is a chauvinist fantasy, and that appeals to the human: it paints the picture of a world that needs bold heroes, a world besieged by darkness, a world where glory and justice can be had at the end of a sword. The existential yearning that makes

human intelligence vulnerable to this appeal is too much of a topic for this humble primer, but the appeal is real. I am absolutely a huge fan of adventure fiction myself, grown on fantasy literature, but still: this heroic idea is the fantasy. Not the elves and wizards and magic, the idea of the "hero" is the single most fantastic part of the literary construct that D&D rests on. The real world doesn't work quite like that.

But we cannot just conclude that human fantasies of adventure and heroism are a false consciousness and therefore to be discarded; humanity does not allow. You cannot grow a man to know evil unless you put that man to study, and ask them to observe and understand. Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it, if I'm really forced to belabor the obvious. You cannot get past that heroic daydream by ignoring it and hoping it will go away. That conclusion of mine about heroism being a mirage? You cannot come to that unless you know heroism, and know yourself. Anything else, like forbidding children from playing at war, is intellectual disarmament.

Therefore, I suggest a constructively ironic relationship with the game: acknowledge what it is about, understand what it is about, and learn from it. You are not your character, the "adventurers" in the game do not need to be morally justified in your own eyes. You can play a conquistador, making con-



decisions for conquistador reasons, without being a conquistador yourself. You don't need to enjoy being your character; at our tables players are generally quite open about acknowledging the horrible things their characters are sometimes driven to do out of greed or necessity.

Just like we don't play the game of football to be able to grandstand over the losing team (elevating bullying over sportsmanship), we don't play a game about fantastic filibustering to day-dream about the illicit utopia of "might makes right" and "the only good orc is a dead orc". To the contrary: I keep repeating how the wargaming way is about learning, and this is one of the topics very much on the test: understanding the economic and social reality that drives the military and economic structures underlying the kinds of raider-robber industry that D&D depicts.

Playing with children, and with friends, is common. I do not believe that we have a duty to censor the subject matter of the game for their sake, but our personal responses and lessons we take are our responsibility, so it matters whether you glorify or question the D&D filibuster expedition.

I don't really think that humans have the option of *not* learning from something complicated and passionate like D&D. The only question is, what lessons will you teach?

Advanced Matters

I hope what came before paints a fairly whole picture, even if a simple one. The next section is for some more advanced topics, of less concern when you're just starting out. I'm more thinking of experienced roleplayers and referee types here.

Overview of the game

As any rules text will tell you, D&D has a **referee** (Dungeon Master, Game Master) and a bunch of players. The referee prepares a scenario, an adventure to be had, while the players prepare a party of adventurers to tackle that scenario. So far so good, that's the big picture.

Going deeper, the virtue of the adventure, what appeals in the game, is in its **literary qualities** that suggest accessible, human-relevant themes: adventure, history, fantasy. The conceit is that the game would present, address, allow these things to be experienced. The game is about these literary qualities in the sense that they form its substantial topic: D&D is about medieval armies, dragons, elves, and wizards. Those things can be experienced and played with in the game.

This is where the greater schools of D&D tradition start to diverge, in what is meant to be done with this cluster of playing pieces. It is clear that we are not discussing traditional storytelling, this is a **roleplaying game**: the first-person perspective adopted by the players is clearly in the center, as otherwise, D&D would be something more like a novel or a movie instead of the peculiar and recent art of gaming. But, as we've learned as the hobby matures, that still doesn't tell us much: there are a variety of roleplaying activities that could occur over the subject matter of heroic fantasy.

So what's the purpose of play? Picking the arguably first answer ever given to this question — depends on where

in history you pinpoint therapeutic roleplaying, I guess — the wargaming way posits that we are to form **challenges** and conundrums out of the fictional substance, and posit those challenges, scenarios, or adventures, to each other. In struggling, debating, and solving the questions we enjoy the subject matter by learning about it in a hands-on way: the first-person perspective unique to the gaming arts allows us to get up to our armpits in the material.

The dual merits of the practice

As the referee offers up a scenario for wargaming consideration, the task of the players is to engage the situation, think and decide, lay out their reasoning and execute a plan to guide the scenario to a victory for their assigned side. In D&D specifically, the players each run individual characters, forming a party of adventurers to contest the referee's scenario together.

This wargaming activity has the merits of sport: we practice the entirety of **sportsmanship** from social relationships of teams and rivalries to the character-building of victories and defeats. It also has the merits of **scholastics**: whatever the subject matter of the game, the wargamer learns it inside and out, puts it through its paces in the simulation tools of the craft, and has the potential to derive insight into how things work.

The key to more purposeful play is in understanding what makes it fulfilling in the first place. Sportsmanship and scholastics, that's the creative purpose of the wargaming way.

Other Creative Values

It may be useful to contrast the wargaming way with other ideas about roleplaying, so as to see the edges of the assertion.

Immersion

When players enjoy the experience of the game fiction, allowing themselves to simply be and go with it. Perhaps imagine having a pleasant alter ego in an imaginary world. It is nice, and wargaming can leverage intuitive techniques, but it is not the ultimate purpose, and thus we are willing to compromise immersion to challenge and learn.

Story

Of utmost concern to some roleplaying games. It is wonderful how the interactive events in a roleplaying game turn into stories, and the form has potential as a storytelling device, but it is not the wargaming way to suborn the authentic simulation of events to dramatic patterns. What happens, happens, even if it makes for meaningless anti-drama.

System mastery

Learning and appreciating the rules of a game for their own internal logic, enjoying it for its own sake. Chess, for instance. While formal systems have their place in the methodology of wargaming, and we do enjoy system mastery for its insights, those insights need to be applied to the fiction and turned into conclusions to carry true weight.

Reading advice

Take any old school D&D rules text as your starting point. Doesn't matter much which; the game has an inchoate creative history, and its texts tend to step dance around the essential matter of purpose. Fairly early on, in the early 1980s, the texts start encouraging an understanding of the game that is more about the exciting experience of being a fantasy adventurer and less about the wargame. Even that, though, is not an essential obstacle, because the actual rules and structure of the game remain for a time.

Refer to your rules text in parallel with the present study. You will find that the text describes procedures and game mechanics for creating and leveling fantasy adventurers. There is a section of combat rules intended for resolving small skirmish battles between adventurers and monsters. Hopefully, there is a set of "dungeoneering rules", the procedures of underground maze exploration.

All of this rules matter ultimately exists in service to the higher-order idea of adventurous maneuvering against dynamic opposition in a fantastic milieu. The particulars of how the rules do this are fairly clever in places, but I am not so concerned with that here; it is more important that the players confront a puzzle, a challenge: given this fictional situation, this **scenario**, what would the hero choose, what **maneuver** would bring you victory? That's the discussion we're having. The rules are merely the language.

Appropriate game texts

Many people would unhesitatingly call what I am teaching here "old school D&D". That's fine, I often use the term myself where it helps more than hinders. The reason I'm not putting it front and center is that I don't want to appropriate a label that has wider cultural sensibilities still: there certainly are players of old school D&D who would disagree with what I'm presenting here; I want to respect that. "Old school" refers to the wider culture of what D&D was like in the '70s, and while I think it's fair to call Muster *a particular take* on that, there are also other, incompatible old school doctrines out there.

That being said, when looking for rules texts generally compatible with Muster, anything called "old school" will probably serve better than anything more modern. The incremental changes and a couple of revolutions in D&D culture between the '70s and now make for unneeded hassle for a beginner to sort through. For practical purposes, get an old school game text for your starting point.

I don't consider the specific choice of rules text essential to playing in the wargaming way. You could even take the most recent edition of D&D, 5th at this writing, and apply the playstyle to that. It just takes more effort.

Ultimately the choice should only depend on whether the **mechanical aesthetics** please you, and how well the rules chassis applies to your **campaign subject matter** in a simulative sense. It is also helpful if the rules text doesn't actively militate against the wargaming way, but up to you

how much critical reading and initial revamping you feel like doing.

To be clear: whatever the rules text you choose, it can only ever be a starting point. Choose a starting point that seems pleasant to work with, but do not make the "system" a totem of worship. The wargaming way is to mar it with the reality of rulings that will come, to each campaign their own.

Rules are Simple and Crude

I will address a fairly obvious reaction that people often have when encountering D&D for the first time. This is all the more true for gamers first trained on other games, like me.

This first reaction is that when you read a rules text, the rules of the game are both fairly **simple** and fairly **crude** compared to other games. Technical conservatism ruled D&D culture over its first three decades, which is a bad place to be when you're *also* developing new things and therefore going through much awkward, crude design work.

For example, you're unlikely to find an elaborate skill rules system in a D&D rules text worthy of the name. And if you do, it's going to be quite primitive and crude. And it will still take many pages of dense rules text, managing to simultaneously be simple and complicated.

I remember well what my own perspective on D&D was back in the '90s, as a teenager familiarizing myself with roleplaying games. Back then it was not uncommon for Finnish gamers to get brought up exclusively on post-D&D

Recommend Some Texts

These are totally just an idiosyncratic crosscut of what I've read and appreciated. I know for a fact that there are many equally good picks out there.

Original '74 D&D

Rough but authentic, with elegant ideas that get dropped or obscured later. Better in touch with the wargaming way than most D&D texts.

Basic D&D

Any edition of Basic from the '70s to the '90s is generally a good starting point, combining approachability and a core wargaming ethos with stable historical continuity. This is the relevant mainline of design in what comes later.

Retroclones

Labyrinth Lord, Swords & Wizardry, Lamentations of the Flame Princess, Old School Essentials, or any of several other modern game texts are fairly details-compatible glosses and re-editions of the old game. Recommended over the old texts for newcomers, as the overall product is generally superior.

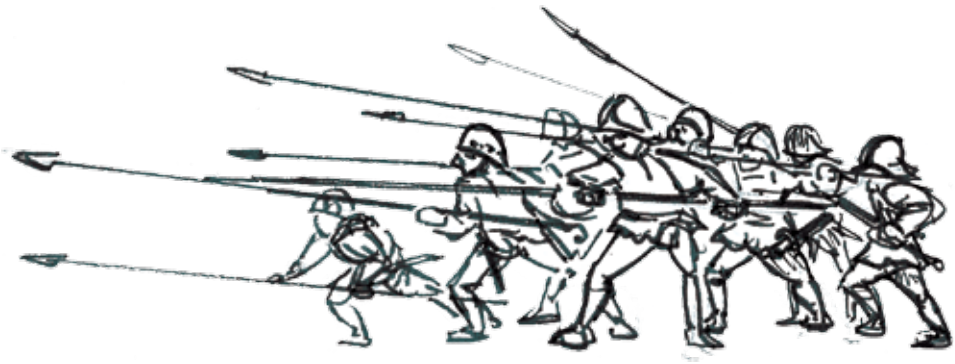
Commentaries

For the veteran roleplayer who's just looking for those few missing insights to form their complete picture, it's probably most useful of all to study technical commentary. Philotomy Jurament's OD&D Musings and James Maliszewski's Grognardia are both excellent follow-ups for students familiar with basic game texts.

trad games like Runequest, Paranoia, and Cyberpunk 2020, that rich mainstream vein of games... but without the hegemony of D&D typical of the American experience.

When that teenager brought up with post-D&D mature RPG tradition encountered D&D (Mentzer Basic and AD&D 2e in my case), the game was nigh incomprehensible. And it wasn't just because I lacked the creative context for understanding how a roleplaying game could even be a wargame; no, if anything I was more confounded by how crude and messy the game was technically. Entirely missing the idea of challenge didn't help, of course, but still; these were not top-shelf game texts by the measure of the time.

So that's a thing, but with some experience under my belt, I think I can explain why this is the situation. The explanation might be helpful in building some trust; you should try the game on its own merits before condemning it for not fitting in the standards of later roleplaying games, not built with the wargaming way in mind.



Why be simple

D&D rules are essentially simple because they are intended to be used in short, atomistic formal mechanical chains that constantly dip back into the fictional situation that the players are tracking with their minds, maps, and playing pieces. The rules need to withstand the stresses of allowing the fiction to develop organically. The later tradition of tabletop roleplaying has the luxury of discarding this generic applicability requirement in favor of fixed assumptions about stable scenarios: you can afford to build more elaborate if you have stronger preconceptions about what the game will be. Basically, theatrical set pieces can afford more formal complex detail than real improvisation.

I think the most striking example of how this design principle affects the game's performance envelope is the way that D&D is capable of adjudicating skirmish warfare *with major dynamic inputs*. A well-developed D&D campaign features authentic operational maneuvers that cascade into lethal high-stakes battles with a wide variety of natures from sieges to chases, *all in real-time*. You can resolve 20 skirmishes in the time it takes many new games to resolve one, and all without pre-session preparations.

Another clear example is character creation, something that's become the primary activity of extreme complexity in some branches of modern roleplaying. The process used in early D&D is far simpler, but remember that it is intended for an authentic high-lethality game where you really *can* lose

your character fifteen minutes into the game. How fun would it be to combine a heavy, meditative character creation *project* with that kind of gameplay?

This is not a trivial property of a fantasy adventure roleplaying game. Later iterations of the form consistently fail, and it's because they're not atomically simple in their respective rules for doing the same things. You can sort of fake it by not using the rules, but that's not the same thing.

Why be crude

But then, if the rules are simple by purpose, why are they so crude? I've studied the D&D textual tradition a fair bit, and I'll freely admit that the game texts only really start to come together after the fall of TSR; up till then they start amateurishly haphazard, develop into snake oil insanity, and then descend into corporate pettiness. Just calling it as I see it here.

It's clearly not that the rules *have to* be crude, even if that's what it might well have seemed like in the 1980s. Parallel developments in gaming, in wargaming and roleplaying, haven't had these issues. Peer companies, often working at far smaller scales, did consistently better through most of the era. And most condemningly, the present-day old school renaissance game texts are usually fairly legible, about as much as rules written in other traditions. It's just the root tradition of D&D that reads like it was put together in Babylonian exile.

So the main reason for this situation goes back to the nature of **rules cruft**. The early D&D rules texts are by their nature

very raw transcripts of what by and large seems to be an authentic campaign process by the authors. While nothing in particular prevents one from assembling more logical, streamlined, crafted rules to support play, the early basic texts are not that: they are fairly random transcripts, and what's worse, they've been compiled under the misunderstanding that the reading audience is in dire need of having these detailed minute explications of the table rules of the original campaign. The texts try to transplant the entire campaign from the author's group to yours, instead of focusing on how to grow your own.

The way rules cruft works, an **adept facility** is important for its effective use: whatever the rules you use, you should know them by heart, and stand behind them as your chosen campaign material. This usability requirement interacts very badly with the textual tradition of writing down hundreds upon hundreds of pages of minutiae. It's not that the rules would have been that bad in the actual campaign they derive from, but that campaign had a referee fully conversant with the material, who was applying it to a campaign world from which those rules sprang. And it's even possible for a later group to study that rules cruft until it becomes second nature. But you shouldn't have to, because damn that's some low-benefit effort.

The general crudity of the early rules texts is undeniable for all that there are some pearls of game design insight in there. What salvages the game as a whole is that **you have no duty towards that rules cruft**. The game is not the cruft, the game is the underlying structure. If the rules seem

crude to you in places, as they do to me, replace them with more elegance. We stand on the shoulders of giants, we *should* be able to improve on the early attempts at fantasy adventure roleplaying rules cruft.

It is notable that when the Internet came along and TSR-era corporate suppression of scholarly D&D publishing eased up a fair bit, what quickly became evident is that the actual game as it's practiced by individual masters around the world is not crude at all! I recommend reading up on the real procedures and mechanics used by any experienced, powerful referee, whether they choose to publish their house rules as a book or not. They are nearly without exception far, far more elegant, efficient, understandable, and campaign-relevant than the historical root texts or the corporate meal made of them at TSR over the '80s. It's a completely different world.

This might seem obvious to some, but the textual history of D&D has also involved a strong strain of "official rules only" culture. So take this as my counterpoint: the official rules are not that great, don't believe the huckster. Read critically, you can improve on it and build a better campaign.

Saga of Sniper Joe

Let me tell you about my character; could prove illustrative regarding the arcs of experience that players and their characters amass over time.

I tend to run games much more than play myself, but in the mid-'10s I had the opportunity to sit in as a player for a considerable campaign arc. Heikki was running a historical fantasy campaign of his own at that point, sort of a descendant of my earlier game. The adventure Heikki was running was Rahasia, a classic TSR module, but due to the campaign being a full-panoply strategic maneuver sandbox, the adventure was slowly morphing into something unrecognizable as adventurers and evil witches maneuvered against each other in medieval Moldova.

I came into the scenario sort of halfway and lost my first character ignominiously to a dungeon encounter. The second one caught on, though; "Sniper Joe", my Fighter (Ranger really, but the LotFP rules don't really care) ended up playing a decisive role in our success in saving the kingdom from the perils of ancient witchery.

I named Sniper for one of the enemy sprites in the old Megaman video games (sure dates me, I guess), but really the character identity was the typical sort of tragic comedy that I fill my gaming with: Joe was a "Vietnam veteran" (understood implicitly as being a war veteran from some whichever war in the setting's near past; it's a simile rather than literal fact),

a taciturn and paranoid fellow who'd turned his PTSD into the self-destructive second career of being an adventurer. Just some light narrative fluff to amuse myself while the situation developed; I'm the kind of player who enjoys establishing and imagining a bit of character identity.

Sniper served well enough in the witch dungeons, but where he really had his moment of glory was when the party returned to town from their unfinished dungeon excursion and found out that the witches were attempting to coup the entire barony with *Charm Person*. The town was abuzz with the news about the baron's whirlwind romance with some no-name peasant girl incongruously soon after becoming a widower; the party managed to put together the puzzle pieces and realize that the body-hopping witches had migrated from the dungeon to town, threatening the very fabric of society!

Sniper's paranoia sure turned up when we started suspecting the situation, so I went into total spyops mode about infiltrating the party into town, identifying the witch conspiracy, and then plotting to eliminate them in the face of the baron's Charm-fueled loyalty to his new wife. In hindsight, I mainly wasted time as the witches were not particularly clever masterminds after all, but at least the party managed to operate undetected. Sniper himself sat for a week outside the castle, counting soldiers and waiting for the chance to assassinate a witch with a crossbow.

Our investigation pointed at there being three witches in captured bodies of beautiful young peasant girls; one the

newly-wed wife of the baron, the other two her old friends and chambermaids. The baron was fully under their spell, and while the situation was obviously socially controversial, the witches were firmly embedded at court nevertheless. The worst of it was that the baron was now planning to travel to introduce his new wife to the king of Moldova next week! Stakes suddenly jumped far higher, kinda obvious what their long game was about here.

The situation seemed unsolvable, and the party was already planning our escape from what seemed like an impossible strategic situation when I got the idea that would save Moldova: we would have to frame the witches for witchcraft. They were clearly careful about sticking to their roles at the castle, but as common-blood peasantry, it should be possible to turn the court against them with some well-staged occult mummery.

The idea turned into a veritable heist plan with the party running timed, separate tasks in an effort to steal the dead baroness's corpse and smuggle it into the quarters of the new one, while simultaneously socially hacking the court to set up the circumstances for a shocking reveal.

The execution of the ploy was on point, although discovering that the new baroness-witch had a *pet leopard* in her quarters was a bit of a complication; we lost Pjotr the Thief there. Otherwise, though, surprisingly smooth sailing, albeit at the price of the lives of a couple of guards. Sniper and another accomplice, Durriger, even took a dip in the baron's treasury on the way out of the castle.

The witches were cool customers, as befits immortal evil body-hoppers, but our elaborate frame-up was good enough to crack their cool and send them shooting, at which point we essentially had all we wanted; the entire castle witnessing the evil magic. We didn't have any real means to prevent their escape, but we had at least rescued the barony from the grip of Satan! Nobody ever found out that we had framed the witches for being witches, murdered some castle guards to bring it about, and stolen from the baron while doing it. Perfect heist!

The next major development in Sniper's "character build" was when later he had the fortune to discover a poisonous oracular snake (let it bite you, and if you survive the poison save, divine an answer to a question) that the party cottoned to as quite the strategic resource. Having a Cleric for saving throw bonuses was, of course, essential. Sniper was mightily impressed by the sheer mystery in these Rumanian wilds, firming up his identity as a ranger type. Now he even had a creepy pet familiar, which I somehow found incredibly empowering. I loved the idea of finding more naturey weird tales stuff for Sniper!

Sniper Joe ultimately reached 2nd level in the dungeons of Rahasia, at which point I decided that it was time for him to "retire"; I was planning a more deliberate regional playstyle for him, letting him wander those Moldovan wildernesses a bit and maybe come back later if new adventure hooks occurred in his particular retirement hunting grounds. I think I was partly motivated here by wanting to develop some Ranger rules for LotFP, and developing a wider character stable.

Also, Sniper did something pretty funny while in retirement: as a humble woodsman he had little need for the massive pile of gold that being involved in Rahasia gained him, so Sniper put a neat 1000 rupees into a chest, buried it in a dangerous spot (spoilers: a bear is involved) and drew up a treasure map. Sniper Joe's Treasure, as I like to call the adventure I wrote about that, is still waiting for some bold woodsman to get a little adventuring nest egg from it.

Some fun with downtime play, you understand; Sniper burying his treasure so somebody else could later score it for more XP was a funny framing device for my writing a new adventure that I could then run for others, as I have done since then on a few occasions. Maybe I made it a bit too difficult, as nobody's gotten the treasure yet.

Sniper's story ends the same way most adventurers go, on adventure: while I was planning to develop other characters and let the Sniper get comfortable in retirement, he was just too damn responsible to not answer the call when some kind of grain plague, or perhaps space slug infestation (the details were vague) threatened the barony. So Sniper went back on the road fairly soon afterwards.

Confident in his new 2nd level might, Sniper didn't hesitate to take lead in scouting and surprising a bunch of opforce mercenaries we'd found hiding in the countryside. The mercenaries, "Black Sellecks", had a few guards out in the nocturnal woods, ready victims for a skilled bowman such as Sniper here.

At the time this happened the campaign was creatively in the middle of a bit of a development discussion over the rules: I and a few other players were advocating for more organic and expansive development of the rules, while Heikki the GM was standing firm as an advocate of minimalist LotFP as the campaign rules engine. This would prove very relevant to Sniper, as I took a kinda sorta demonstrative approach to the problems with orthodox D&D (or LotFP) not having any rules for sneaky ambush archery: Sniper would try to snipe one of these Black Sellecks, 2nd level Fighters, with his bow!

I guess the demonstration worked very well: Sniper hit handily with his bow, dealt 5 points of damage, as one does with a bow, and then got into melee with the guard, who being 2nd level was unlikely to be felled by a single arrow no matter how carefully placed, what with averaging about 9 HP. I have to admit that I didn't expect Sniper to just outright get killed in the fight, but at least it made for a memorable demonstration of how the game models ambush archery. Sniper totally had the drop on the guy, but no...

Sniper's entire adventuring career spanned a bit under 10 sessions, I think. I would characterize that as mid-length; long enough to get a tombstone.

I would obviously regret Sniper's untimely death afterwards. He had such potential: good stat line (15 DEX!), a cool familiar, a clear strategic vision of how to advance (or simply retire). His was, potentially, not just the story of a fighting-man learning to live with his damage from the war, but also

the story of exploring and discovering the myth and beauty in the Rumanian wildernesses he was looking to call home. I could already see how cool he'd be with a few more levels under his belt.

At the time my impulse to take the risk against the Black Sellecks was, I felt, frivolous. The sudden combat procedure ending in character death, a shock. With time I've come to conclude that it wasn't *that* bad; sure I was motivated by a regrettable impulse to demonstrate how dumb the combat rules are, but I also couldn't have foreseen the bad dicing that ultimately caused Sniper to fold so suddenly in that dark forest ambush. Whatever one thinks about the proper modeling of ambush archery, Sniper could just as well have followed that shot with a lethal sword-blow, instead of getting gutted himself before getting the opportunity to break off and escape. That's the dice.

As I said at the beginning of the story, I have been GMing the game far more than playing myself, so I haven't logged nearly the amount of character play time as many of my peers. I imagine that they also carry their dead with them like this, which I have to say cannot but make me considerate of it whenever a beloved character dies. The game is so powerful and cruel, and I don't wonder at all that many people simply do not want it in their lives.

The Simulation Program

Dungeons & Dragons is a wargame about adventure and adventure fiction. A lot of ink gets spilled about how the game is exciting and heroic. Back in the day, the attentions were on how realistic the game was, or wasn't. Too little is said about the underlying assumptions of the world simulation, particularly as D&D is unusually ambitious for a wargame in this regard. I think that looking into what is the actually interesting thing that the game does is worthwhile here.

What are we simulating?

D&D's famous character-leveling system allows player character adventurers to grow stronger as they succeed in adventures, moving on to new more dangerous and exciting adventures. Why is that? Isn't it kinda weird for somebody to become "stronger" by "adventuring"?

The conceit is often presented as modeling growth of skill and career experience on the part of the character; something that makes little sense when you look at the general thrust of the rules. If the rules are simulating training and experience, how those things actually work for human beings, they are truly bad at it. Human beings become more traumatized, not more skilled, by being used as punching bags by monsters.

An ugly undertone to the question is brought by the clear gamification concerns introduced into the game by its early

developers; Gary Gygax, for instance, indubitably saw the potential in varying rewards and punishments in a gambling fashion, and more often than not he would (cynically to my mind) choose entertainment over enlightenment. Not always, the man clearly struggles with the creative nature of the activity, but all too often the game seems to take its shape from the awful convenience of the tyranny of fun. The answer to why characters grow stronger over time is that it's the best way to hook you, dear.

Were this to be the answer to the question of D&D's simulative program, the game would be no better than its infinite video game descendants. A mechanical Skinner box teaching players to delight in imaginary gold coins and doling those out at rates optimized for satisfaction. See numbers grow bigger, a progress bar dings; the stultifying opium of our age.

A MODEL OF HEROIC NARRATIVE

Setting that depressing non-answer to the side, here's the positive substance I see in D&D: the game's program of study as a wargame concerns a shifting dial of **dramatic privilege**: characters of higher level are intended to model the way adventure protagonists in more high-flying, more stylized genres of adventure storytelling operate and relate to the world around them.

Under this interpretation, player characters start at 1st level and advance to higher levels *through successful adventuring* because the activity of play acts to test and prove the given character's nature as a true protagonist. The game is modeling protagonism through the whimsical conceit that we only discover who are the heroes by seeing who survive heroic adventures. Your character only gains the modeled advantages of being "the hero" as a consequence of first surviving a heroic adventure successfully.

Here it is essential to understand the distinction between a game that models the "heroic stature" of the fictional protagonist, and one that models how stories actually develop, in terms of plot. D&D is of the former type: the game is supposed to provide a stochastically reliable spread of outcomes in adventurous challenges for fictional heroes pitted against adventurous perils, using fuzzy logic to bridge uncertainties in the model. The outcome is not a story, merely the simulated approximation of "what would happen if", just

one that happens to account for ineffable heroism as one of the factors.

Understanding this scheme is a precondition to truly wargaming with the D&D chassis, as you cannot calibrate the rules mechanics and make appropriate rulings without a clear understanding of what it is that you're modeling. Wargaming lives from modeling, so for a game intent on modeling pulp adventure fiction, you gotta be able to grab a Doc Savage novel and assign mechanical benchmarking to the character on the basis of the text. What level is Doc Savage? That's what level in D&D measures, the degree of romantic distinction, the genre the hero exists in, if you will.

This used to be something of a pastime back when wargaming in D&D was more popular: debating what is the appropriate level to model, say, Gandalf the Grey or Conan the Barbarian at. I'll freely admit that I'm offering a fairly novel theory of what D&D is about, but it also feels like I'm also not the first to wander these paths.

The baseline simulation

Before considering the way the dramatic privilege of the protagonist maps into the game's rules, it is necessary to consider the baseline reality simulation utilized by D&D: the game offers a complete, simple model of how the underlying fictional setting functions when dramatic protagonists are not around. The dramatic privilege operates against this baseline and gains its significance from it.

As one might expect, D&D deals first and foremost with dungeon warfare, so that's what the important benchmarks deal with as well:

A normal human has a few hit points, say 1d6. This handful of points is an abstract resource that buffers the person from the awry consequences of adventuring. The points get lost during an adventure, recovered according to specific rules, and if you run out, bad things get to happen to the character. But as long as the points persist, everything is essentially fine.

An adventurous peril causes some injury measured in hit points. A foeman striking a character with a sword might cause 1d6 damage, so a fairly commensurate amount compared to how many points their victim might have; the strike may prove traumatic, or not. Other perils cause HP damage likewise, more for perils considered more definitely dangerous.

Joining battle for default combatants (normal soldiers, say) is a confusing affair where, barring specific defenses and armoring, everybody has a roughly 50/50 chance of hurting their foeman over a unit of melee time. Might happen, might not, but if you keep at it somebody's going to get hurt sooner or later. There is potential for defensive strategies to take those odds way the hell down. Other risky maneuvers have similar "might happen, might not" odds calculations. When hurt does happen, see above for how hit points burn.

Numbers go up for two distinct reasons: either a given creature is actually superhuman in some relevant way, like a

hippopotamus is larger and stronger than a human, or they are considered to hold superior thematic agency in the form of levels. Both of these concerns have their own detailed benchmarking to use in statting up an immense variety of situations and how they relate to hit point pools.

So that's the core of the D&D **realistic baseline model** of adventurous interaction. Dirt simple and very abstract, right? It needs to be because the game elaborates and gilds on top of the baseline far, far beyond what you would expect to be possible. But that's the basics.

I cannot stress the importance of understanding this enough for a prospective referee: when you need to know how much damage it does when an engine block falls on a car mechanic, the answer is not in the rulebook, but it sure is in the simulative model: 1d6 points is appropriate for ordinary, non-supernatural perils that have the potential to cause serious injury and death, but no certainty of it.

The dramatic level scale

There are many directions of elaboration for how different adventurous circumstances gain you hit points or lose you hit points in a merry-go-round of gaming goodness, but the one most immediately relevant for players is how adventurers grow stronger by gaining "levels". Leveling fundamentally affects the rules that apply to characters in ways that make them more capable of actually performing like adventure protagonists. The

D&D Core Mathematics

A lot goes into how D&D simulates adventure fiction, but I would argue that the mechanical foundation is in how hit points buffer damage. Consider:

Linear HP gain

An ordinary person.....~3 HP
4th level action hero.....~15 HP
8th level superhero.....~30 HP

Hit point gain per level is 3–5 points or so, linear progression. Not only are heroes rare, but they also operate on a somewhat conceivable scale compared to mundane humanity: a hero is kinda like four mundane men.

Logarithmic damage

Being terribly upset.....~1 HP
Heat stroke.....~2 HP
Fight goes awry.....~3 HP
Falling into a pit.....~3 HP
Dangerous deprivation....~3 HP
Ogre's mighty blow.....~6 HP
Baleful pulp magic.....~10 HP
Catapult in the face.....~10 HP

Level-matched damage, on the other hand, scales sublinearly, with characters and monsters gaining hit points faster than they gain damage-dealing potential. Of course exceptions abound, but the baseline of level-appropriate peril seems to roughly follow the binary logarithm: 1d6 on 1st level, 3d6 on 10th.

Maneuver units

1st level.....~3 HP.....~3 dmg
tank 0 hits before going down
4th level...~15 HP.....~6 dmg
tank 2 hits before going down
8th level...~30 HP.....~9 dmg
tank 3 hits before going down

The essential consequence of linear HP gain and logarithmic damage gain is that higher-level characters have more "maneuver units", opportunities to survive, retreat or triumph before dying to a level-matching danger. This is the "heroism" of D&D philosophy.

game suggests that you should start play at the realistic baseline and continue the investigation into more far-fetched realms of romantic adventure fantasy as your play skills grow.

This stuff is examined far too rarely in D&D culture, which is a shame, as it causes lots of unnecessary confusion over how things should work. Fact is, 1st level D&D characters are frail, poor bastards likely to meet terrible ends when they dare to go on an adventure. This makes higher-level characters shine like the precious gems they are. Presenting D&D as a game of heroic derring-do does a disservice to the way it spans the genres.

In practical terms, here's how leveling and the attendant HP gain align with literary genre:

1st-level characters, low-tier adventurers, ~3 hit points worth of realistic protagonism
are barely important enough to have a name. They would be right at home in a realistic (often phrased "cynical") adventure story, the kind where characters sometimes die and there are no heroes per se. Everybody is just a person trying to survive. War, crime, and spy thrillers are occasionally written at this grim, nihilistic level of anti-dramatic distinction, but really, this is almost just modeling reality (or the understanding of it the players bring to the table, anyway). If these adventurers didn't insist on going into horrible places to meet terrible fates, they might as well be ordinary people.

At this level, adventurers have roughly as many hit points as any normal human in the world. They don't have any particularly wondrous special abilities or privileges. You're

essentially playing an everyman desperate enough to embark on a dangerous adventure.

4th-level characters, mid-tier heroes, ~15 hit points in an action hero package
are comfortably heroic in the low-profile way that adventure fiction presents: the story doesn't go out of its way to depict the hero as an invulnerable god of war or anything like that, but they have luck, fate, and plot armor to a degree that makes it really obvious who's the hero and who's just support cast.

Most adventure fiction heroes from Flash Gordon to Indiana Jones to Batman pretty much operate by these "mid-level" rules. The core mechanical difference compared to normal people is that such characters have a fair amount of hit points buffer helping them survive the risks they take. And some fairly exceptional skills, of course.

8th-level characters, high-tier superheroes, ~30 hit points of emblematic larger-than-life presence
are essentially superhuman, the rules twist and massage reality in their favor in numberless ways. Their skills border on fantastic perfection, and in the fantasy genre, they wield many mighty magics. The upper end of the adventure fiction power curve presents such characters, but it's also the level at which adventure fiction starts to turn into something different. Superheroes and wuxia stories are perhaps less about adventure (people in exciting peril) and more about idealized forces on a clashing course. Whatever it is, D&D sure posits to model it still.

How the rubber hits the road

I might be belaboring the obvious here, but so as to be completely explicit, this is the fundamental technical model that the D&D action resolution rests on:

Peril occurs! → HP damage! → 1st-level poor bastard dies!
→ 4th-level hero keeps going!

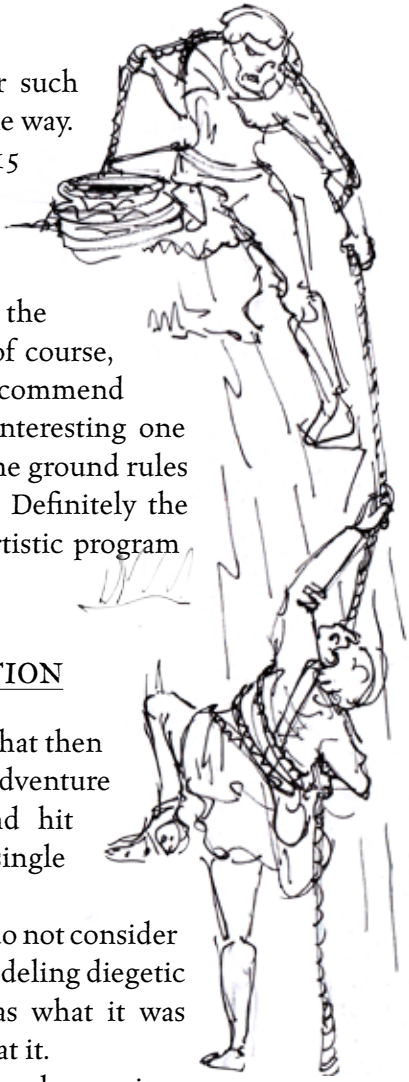
You want peril rules (combat, whatever) that allow characters to maneuver in between taking hits. Let that HP pool be a threat clock. This is the way the game handles heroism: where another would have fallen, the hero keeps going. The first ambush of the bad guys "luckily misses" (deducts hit points). That is the dramatic privilege.

Invitation to study

The really cool thing about the game's suggested course of study, starting a campaign at 1st level and struggling to "level up" and enter into new types of adventure fiction, is that it's all so very organic. These benchmarks about how a 4th level character is "heroic" or whatnot are very much not top-down proclamations of tautological definition: characters grow into heroism at their own paces, the surrounding campaign setting works on its own rules, and in wargaming D&D there is no puppetry over how things should work out. By all means, have your company of ordinary human soldiers attack Count Dracula, and see how that works out for you; this is the very

game meticulously crafted to answer such questions in a thoughtful and gameable way. I'm characterizing a "hero" as having 15 hit points from organic experience with the game, not as a demand.

The conceit of fighting your way out of the "fantasy Vietnam" and on to the wider waters of heroic adventure is, of course, not carved in stone. For now, I would recommend sticking with the program: it is an interesting one specifically for how ruthlessly it sets the ground rules and defines the currency of heroism. Definitely the recommended entry point into the artistic program of D&D.



Character class in simulation

Taking the preceding as established, what then is the role of the character class in adventure fiction simulation? Besides level and hit points, that's the most striking single mechanical conceit in D&D.

As with character level, I obviously do not consider it credible to treat character class as modeling diegetic occupation or social class; if that was what it was doing, it would be doing a terrible job at it.

I would, instead, argue that character class posits to model protagonism privilege of a specific literary

archetype. This is why character classes are generally based on the idealized archetype of this or that kind of literary protagonist, and why they are filled with specific rules about how that type of character breaks the normal rules of the game at different levels (intensities of dramatic exception).

A possibly enlightening way to think about modeling something as ineffable and arguably subjective as the literary theme of "heroism" or, interchangeably, the structural narrative conceit of "being a protagonist", in the perennial D&D terms of class and level: your level is a weight of influence upon the game world, akin to a reservoir of water, and your class is the channel through which said influence thrusts upon the world. The character class is a modeling statement of how, in a given campaign, heroism manifests.

With most of its rules mechanics simple and concerned with the practical, this is where the bulk of the game's attentions lie: in charting what kinds of heroes can exist in the game setting, and how they interact with the world and each other. When choosing what classes exist in your campaign world, you are modeling the kind of dramatic protagonism that the campaign at hand accepts as real.

Technical Things To Do

I realize that much of what I'm writing in this book is very general, very abstract. The reasons are good, like how I try to focus on getting the important parts right, instead of worrying about what is fleeting, what is just a matter of taste, or what depends on a wider overall context. There is a balance to this, and at least some readers would find all of this easier to follow along if the context was more concrete. But that's what actual game texts are for, you're just reading a humble commentary here.

So let's try it this way: I'll take one of the rules texts suggested earlier — doesn't matter which one it is — and I'll pick up some basic technical points that could be done this way or that way, and I'll tell you how I do it, and why.

Ability Scores

3d6-in-order functions best for this game, don't buy into the various biased-rolls and point-buy schemes. Those are suited for games where the player characters are important people by default. In a highly lethal wargaming campaign, it's better if character generation is quick, characters are unexceptional, and the occasional unusually good stat line is cause for excitement.

If you're like me, then the big philosophical issue with truly random stat lines is the permanent unfairness and the burning desire to play a character with a good stat line. It's

simply not very fun to start permanently gimped in a way that can't be done anything about, just because you happened to roll badly. It's somehow even worse if this is the character who gets to 2nd level, so you're building a hero on flawed foundations. I imagine that this kind of psychology has been a big driver in D&D abandoning the otherwise superior randomly generated stat line over the years.

The golden rules fix that solves this single flaw is fairly obvious: if ability scores can change through the game (something that orthodox rules texts discourage for bad reasons), with characters gaining and even losing points over their adventuring careers, the initial tyranny of fortune becomes palatable again.

The clever referee can even use various training rules to encourage adventurers to spend money and time on truly serious flaws in their constitution. You like money sinks, right?

In summary: Ability score generation should be very strict initially. It should, however, be possible to improve on the initial stat line over the campaign long-term. Ability scores should not be such a big issue for high-level characters!

Class and Level

Character classes are the practical expression of the ideas of heroism in the campaign. This means that what classes are available to PCs should depend on the setting and general thematic focus of the campaign. There are really no bad choices in this, particularly when you realize that a character class can be defined and described as very broad and abstract, or as very narrowly concrete, and these possibilities serve a purpose.

1st level characters should be understood to be only incrementally more powerful, experienced, wise, heroic, and cool than an unclassed mundane person in the setting. It is only with levels that they become more exceptional; a 2nd level character is a leader of men, and a 3rd level the lead of a gritty adventure movie. Some D&D texts have gotten fairly confused about this over time, in both directions, so it pays to check the assumptions.

D&D rules ever since the publication of AD&D have had a marked tendency for "long level range" systemizations with double-digit level values. I would recommend sticking to more like levels 1–10, the "short level range"; the game math generally works more naturally, and it doesn't actually prevent you from having high fantasy in the game. To the contrary, really, as the referee doesn't get to play keep-away by defining all the really cool things in the setting as only existing at some unachievably high levels.

In summary: Classes should reflect the setting, and levels should consistently model the degrees of heroism.

Experience Points

It is of absolute importance for XP rules to be goal-oriented, achievement-based, and unbiased, for reasons extensively discussed throughout this book.

Besides that, I recommend cultivating consistent, transparent, bright-line experience award schemes that align with scenario goals: the thing players try to do in the scenario is the thing that gains them points, by definition.

I also advise against having XP gains scale directly or indirectly off character level. Characters wanting to gain more XP should enter a new tier of play activity with different XP awards, not just face convenient GM-guaranteed treasure hoards sized out for suitable advancement pacing.

I strongly recommend practicing the **XP gain cap**, a rule that limits an adventurer to gaining at most their XP threshold (the total amount of XP they need for their next level-up) in score in a single scenario. Helps maintain the XP economy against black swan events.

As XP relates to adventurers leveling in their character classes, I recommend pure **exponential progression**, the thing in old D&D rules where the XP total required for the next level is always double the amount required for the last level. The setup works very well alongside organic campaign conduct techniques like character stables, variable-level parties, and restarting at 1st level after losing.

In summary: Treat experience points similar to a video game scoring device. Objective, consistent, transparent.

Hit Points and Scaling

It's one of the core mechanical aesthetics of D&D that you gain one die worth of hit points, a Hit Die, per character level. And big inhuman monsters can get the Hit Dice, too.

Even if your rules don't use use hit dice, I would rather insist on **linear scaling of hit points** to level: 1 unit of them at 1st level, 2 on the 2nd, and so on. It's such a core conceit of how the game uses hit points to simulate adventure fiction affairs. It's the basis of the entire simulation.

And, as a corollary: **logarithmic damage scaling**. If you go [this much damage] × [level] while also having linear hit points, you're not allowing the proportional relationship between perils and adventurers to develop and change as levels increase. Instead of the linear scaling of hit point pools, damage potentials should go more like 1d6 at the 1st level, and 3d6 at the 10th level.

This is something of a common misunderstanding in more modern D&D rules treatments, an insistence on scaling all numbers equally. The issue with uniform scaling is that it engenders illusionary progress and detachment from simulation; things *should* change as you go up levels!

In summary: Hit points scale linearly by level, while damage numbers only increase slowly, resulting in a general tendency towards longer action sequences and fights at higher levels.

Weapons and Armor

D&D has a history of being pretty over-obsessed with weaponry. At first, it was apparently due to the game's technical background in wargaming, and later on, it was just this fashion statement that has kept going to this day. Appealing to give players something to do by puttering about with the equipment details of their characters.

Because this complication is neither particularly realistic nor particularly interesting, I would recommend dropping most of the cruft in this area, all things being equal. Your campaign is probably not going to be one where a sword and an axe should play out particularly differently in the combat mechanics. Frankly, they only ever did for the sake of boardgame gild.

If you end up ripping out this part of a traditional rules treatment, consider replacing it with a simple system where e.g. all characters cause 1d6 damage on a successful attack, but they take a circumstance penalty to hit when using weapons inappropriate to the situation. It doesn't need to be any more complex than this, most of the rest of the elaborate D&D construction around weapon lists and armors and such is of incremental benefit only. Definitely, it is the case that nobody should let that edifice become an obstacle to their game, there are so many more interesting and substantial affairs the game has the potential to tackle.

In summary: Consider letting character equipment mainly be a color thing, it's not such an important and interesting subgame in the big picture.

Healing Rules

Mainline D&D design is encumbered by a technical paradox in how the recovery of hit points is envisioned: on the one hand, it is widely understood that hit points cannot act as an exciting heroic action safety buffer if they cannot be recovered fairly quickly and easily, but on the other hand, the game's earliest iterations insisted on equating hit points with physical injuries, which would then naturally be slow to heal, even setting aside wound fever and such foibles of realism. This was of course unproblematic in the original '74 campaign context concerned strictly with basic dungeoneering expeditions; the contradiction between hit points being adventurous and slow to heal simultaneously only became pressing later.

The paradox was resolved historically by leaning hard on "healing magic", a specific type of resource carried by specialized adventurers called "Clerics". Any given D&D text you have on hand is likely to introduce the conceit. It does resolve the immediate problem of making hit points recoverable in a reasonable adventuring time frame, but the downside is that Clerics are literarily awkward (for most purposes, tastes differ, etc.) and unsuitable to many campaign settings.

Technical tradition recognizes various alternatives to relying on Clerics. For a simple and quick solution you can throw into most rules treatments, I recommend simply saying that adventurers recover all hit points in a "long rest" (camping for a sleep cycle or more), excepting those lost to lingering causes (hunger, heatstroke, poison, etc.), which

are then only recovered after addressing the root cause of the loss. This simple rule fixes the most glaring weaknesses in the traditional scheme while hewing close to the intended spirit of the '74 rules.

In summary: Decide if the Cleric-based hit point recovery works for your campaign. If it doesn't, maybe just say that natural rest recovers the entire HP pool overnight.

Casualty Rules

Older D&D rules tend to describe characters falling to zero hit points as "dead". This is to my best understanding an early-preferred simplification that still stands on its merits for any scenario where you simply don't want to bother with injuries, triage, treatment of crippled veterans, and so on. All legit topics for sure, but not for all games.

Later on, the rules have generally gotten more realistic in this regard, perhaps driven by an unhygienic desire to provide "fudge space" for a referee desiring to decide that a beloved character is only nearly dead, so to speak. Or, equally possibly, you might desire to discover that simulation space between being struck down as a casualty of combat and perhaps recovering from it later. In the real world, there is a wide, tragic window of possibility between being uninjured and being dead.

I generally recommend using some kind of casualty rules for two reasons: the baseline simulation is more realistic if the game actually does measure the idea of injury, and I think it makes for interesting gameplay concerns. The core conceit of 0 HP = death is too easy on the survivors when they should be struggling with the awful choices that triage and survival would reasonably force on the adventurers.

For a simple rules-add to an otherwise baseline system, consider this: after a character falls in combat, they get a saving throw to still be alive after the fight. Quick first aid can advantage the roll. Such an injured character would recover to adventure again, but only if they can be brought home despite the injury here and now.

To be clear, I do not recommend any fundamental shift to the basic logic of defeat and death in dungeoneering: if an adventurer falls in a fight with monsters, and is not recovered by allies in retreat, their fate is surely the same whatever the casualty rules are like.

In summary: Characters don't necessarily die at zero HP, they just become combat casualties. Whatever that means in your campaign.

Skill Rules

Older D&D doesn't really have skill rules in the way that's become standard for traditional roleplaying games over the years. I would advise considering the reasons carefully and trying out the game without such.

One of the big reasons for not having skill rules is that wargamey D&D simulation logic often deemphasizes character skill in task resolution in a big way compared to modern RPG design. For a game coming from the wargaming culture, it made sense to think of tasks foremost in terms of resources (manpower, time, money, etc.) and inherent risk of complication. The idea of having a big-pants expert as part of the adventuring party, somebody whose carefully simulated skill rating would be an overwhelming determinant of whether the task succeeds or not, wasn't as obvious as it is in modern roleplaying.

Unless the campaign has some particular reason to care, I would suggest giving the old style of task resolution a try. It's often more realistic, and it's easier to add skill rules when and if you need them.

In summary: Try the game without skill rules, you might like it.

Campaign Structure

When you begin a new D&D campaign, it is either in **basic** or **extended** format. These are just words I like to use for the strategic scope of the project. Both types are very established, both types are fun games. But I recommend the basic structure to new referees, as it is a simpler, quicker game. You can transition the campaign to the extended model later if you would.

How the basic game plays

In the basic campaign, the strategic context of play is fixed by convention: the game is specifically about *this* adventuring party delving into *this* dungeon in the hopes of finding great treasures, or more specifically some MacGuffin or other defined at scenario start. The game "begins at the dungeon door", as is often said. The subject matter of play is **dungeon warfare**, the doctrine and conduct of dungeon exploration.

This is the game taught by the highly influential Basic D&D line of game texts. It's manageable for newcomers because both the referee and the adventurers have a fairly stable and clear job: to get to play, the referee only needs to prepare to conduct a single dungeon, while the players put together a party by generating characters for all players and putting those together into a party.

I discussed the general outline of how basic D&D plays at the beginning of the book. Like so, in summary:

1) Generate characters, and set up the party. Equipment, hirelings, scenario rumors, etc.
2) GM introduces the scenario, gameplay typically begins at the dungeon entrance.
3) Play the expedition: players maneuver, ref resolves.
4) Return from the dungeon, and score the success.

This expedition cycle is a complete wargame in itself. The dungeons prepared by the referee test adventurers in various ways, asking them for risk management, knowledge of folklore and myth, small-unit military tactics in dark places, and more. The player goal is to above all survive, and secondarily to bring out success from the dreadful depths in the form of treasures to make a venture capitalist blush.

Over several sessions a basic campaign will repeat the pattern: the referee may bring the same dungeon for a new session of play, or if that dungeon has been exhausted, then a new one. The players may make changes to their party composition as their understanding of dungeoneering advances. Fictional particulars about the adventurers, their base town, and the surrounding world no doubt develop, but the game itself is simple and self-constrained: each expedition a dungeon, a new variation of tactical exploration to tackle.

This game has been played a lot and generally speaking it's a hoot. The referee must be unbiased, and that's easier if you run the adventurers through dungeons that are not of your own creation; it makes the scenario more arbitrary and

therefore easier to keep fair than if the referee designs their own dungeons.

However, basic D&D is also fairly narrow. The premise of dungeon assault has a lot of variety, but it does run out with time. D&D's story did not end with that.

Extended vision of a living world

Extended D&D, sometimes called "expert", "advanced", or "sandbox", is what basic D&D adapted into, and tends to adapt today when played for a while. It is fairly natural for both the referee and the players to start asking questions about what lies outside that dungeon, after all. Experienced groups and referees often brew a new campaign in the extended format from the start, sort of starting from where their earlier efforts in learning the game have left off.

Characteristic of extended D&D is that it has a strategic layer lacking in the basic D&D: the adventurers still enter dungeons on treasure-hunts, yes, but they also have lives between adventures, they plan expeditions, travel to far-away places, visit royal courts, sail on ships and generally live the exciting lives of high-rolling adventurers, with all the challenges and strategic concerns that involves. Many conceits involved in the basic game grow less binary and more complicated: adventurers might spend several sessions in a single adventure location; players might have many characters they manage in a "character stable"; characters may have complicated motivations and interests beyond growing

rich by seeking forgotten treasures; the group maintains a calendar of the fictional events, tracing the maneuvers of their adventurers in both space and time.

Perhaps the single most important aspect of extended D&D, whence it gains the appellation of "sandbox": it is no longer the referee who chooses the next adventure. The referee prepares a variety of ideas, and the play group suggests more, adventures often arising from the personal interests of the players and characters. Such adventures are usually placed on a map so the adventurers can choose where to travel to encounter a variety of risks and opportunities. The very direction of the campaign is in the hands of the players, who can choose both what is wise for their characters, and what is interesting to the players.

The victory condition of extended D&D remains unchanged in the sense that you are still attempting to avoid death and gain points. The long-term prospects in both senses can develop far more complex, of course, and the terrain over which scenarios stretch has the potential to be wildly varied, because of how complicated the substantial matter of D&D has become.

I like to phrase the wargaming topic of general D&D in a very specific way, reflecting the scope and variety of the game:

How will you succeed and prosper in this cruel and beautiful world?

It is a phrasing that lights my guts aflame. How, indeed?

A CAMPAIGN MATURES IN TIERS

Campaigns in the basic or extended mold can both be started from scratch at first level, and they look fairly similar to start with. The biggest difference tends to be that an extended campaign usually involves a map of the wider game setting, and several possible adventuring opportunities the players can choose from. I will discuss the particulars of how to set that up later on. For a basic game preparing a single dungeon suffices.

Basic-type D&D campaigns are naturally limited due to the subject matter vis-a-vis the simulation model of D&D: dungeon adventuring is a low-level game, it is common for campaigns to expand beyond those limits as player experience, campaign history, and character power grow beyond simple dungeoneering.

D&D development made what to me seems like a grave doctrinal error fairly early by attempting to artificially extend dungeon play across a great level range, positing adventurers of high, even double-digit levels engaging in the looting missions in dungeons that developed little in scope from what they were at low levels. I mention this because it is not difficult to find rules texts that encourage extending the basic campaign in this way: with more of the same.

The alternate perspective, also well attested in the game's textual history, posits that a D&D campaign will naturally evolve through a series of "tiers" or modes of play that involve qualitative changes in the subject matter of the game as a natural consequence of the fantasy adventure simulation model: as

player characters grow into greater heroes fit for more romantic types of adventures, as player experience grows and interest shifts, as campaign setting develops intricate detail, new forms of the game reveal themselves to us.

There are philosophies on this, but I take a constructionist view myself: our mission as players of the game is to take its base modeling tools and apply them, to discover what these further tiers of the game are like. It is as objective a course of discovery as charting the opening theory of Chess has been for that game, and as much of a noble human pursuit in indulgently throwing our intellect against the cosmos.

That being said, let me introduce what we know of the **tiering theory** of D&D at this time. Just a quick look at the possibilities. I think that being aware of this big picture helps a lot in planning your own sojourns with the game.

Low Tier

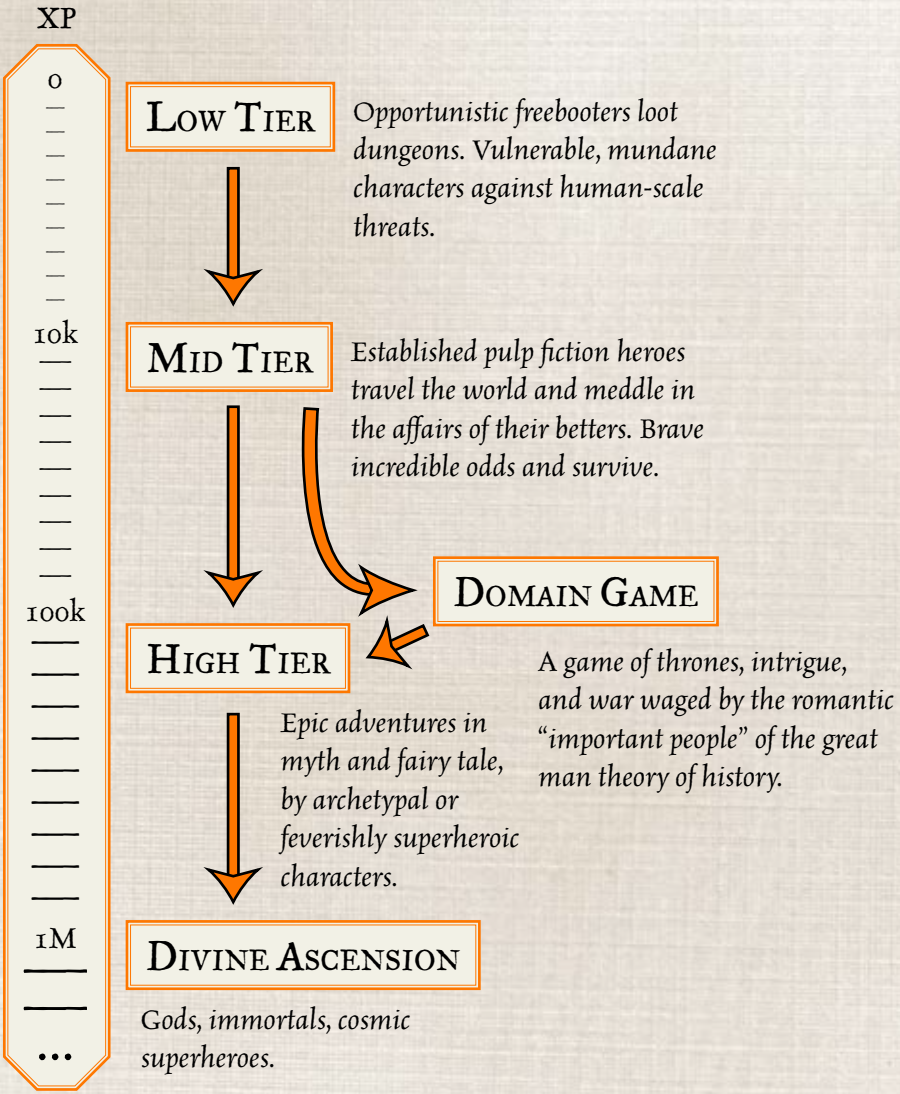
Low-level play,
or Basic tier,
or "fantasy Vietnam",
or dungeoneering tier,

Levels 1–3,
up to 10k XP

is the initial picture of the game as you begin a new campaign, basic or extended in structure. The rules for low-level characters are very lethal, realistic, and traditionally wargame-like. The scenarios are near-exclusively about dungeoneering: footloose adventurers risking their lives to search for treasures in dangerous, mysterious hidden corners of the world. This is

Tiering Theory

Just my current understanding of traditional D&D tiering. Anything beyond low- and mid-tier is highly uncertain, reliant on informed speculation and apocrypha.



the basic D&D; the narrow dungeon-focused campaign never needs to leave this mode of activity as successful adventurers retire into a comfortable victory.

Basic campaigns are constrained to the basic tier, and to my knowledge never essentially leave it. I would personally advise retiring characters at 10 000 XP at the latest, sending them off to enjoy their veritable victory over their chosen career. Levels 1–3, as it is commonly estimated.

Extended campaigns, on the other hand, organically leave the basic tier behind as character positioning (the unique situation of the individual adventurer in the game fiction) grows more complex. Seems to happen in a natural campaign environment somewhere around 5 000 XP, but I've seen expert tier play with 1st level characters, as well as characters who show no signs of stepping up, so it's fairly flexible.

Although it is not common practice yet, there is a lot of unexplored potential in the staging of low-tier scenarios and entire campaigns about concerns beyond dungeoneering. Crime (gentleman thievery, gang life, detective work), war (scouting, special forces work), and even politics or love are very feasible topics for mundane, realistic adventurers to tackle.

In my experience, it takes about 50 sessions of skilled play, maybe 250 hours in total, for a campaign to mature to the point of leaving the low levels decisively behind. Of course, in practical play we dip back down on occasion as fortunes and player interests dictate; it is not forbidden to enjoy scenarios on lower tiers just because you have achieved higher.

Middle Tier

Mid Level,
or Expert tier,
or adventuring tier,
or wuxia tier,

Levels 3–7,
up to 100k XP

is what the extended model campaign slowly turns into as players develop the campaign and characters further. At this point the player characters are noticeably more competent and powerful than the ordinary people they're surrounded by, in a way reminiscent of romantic adventure stories; I often compare the feel to Dumas's Three Musketeers, or pulp heroes like Conan or Flash Gordon, or Chinese wuxia stories.

Many changes occur to the play space, including things like complex character positioning (including determining your own adventure goals instead of generic treasure-hunting); magical weapons like Fireball routinely defeat low-level dungeon combat doctrines; adventurers undertaking long expeditions overland or overseas into hard-to-reach places in search of important quest goals.

Numerically mid-levels tend to emerge around 5 000 XP and continue up to 50 000 or even 100 000 XP, perhaps up to level 8 or so. Many gamers have historically found this tier of play their favorite in D&D, and it does represent a certain sweet spot for players desirous of a game akin to adventure fiction. We enjoy it tremendously when we get there, but it has tended to be short bursts for us, not sustained flight, as failures strike down

would-be heroes and force us to start again. With growing skill, maintaining stable mid-levels play grows ever easier.

Again, there's no inherent reason for a campaign to ever advance beyond this stage. I would personally advise that actually *starting* a campaign at expert tier is difficult and prone to creative failures due to how difficult it is to fake authentic positioning out of the gate. But it's a surmountable challenge for, well, experts in the game; I believe that once you've passed through the low-level gauntlet a couple of times and pushed a living campaign to the mid-levels, such a group might also entertain the idea of starting there from scratch.

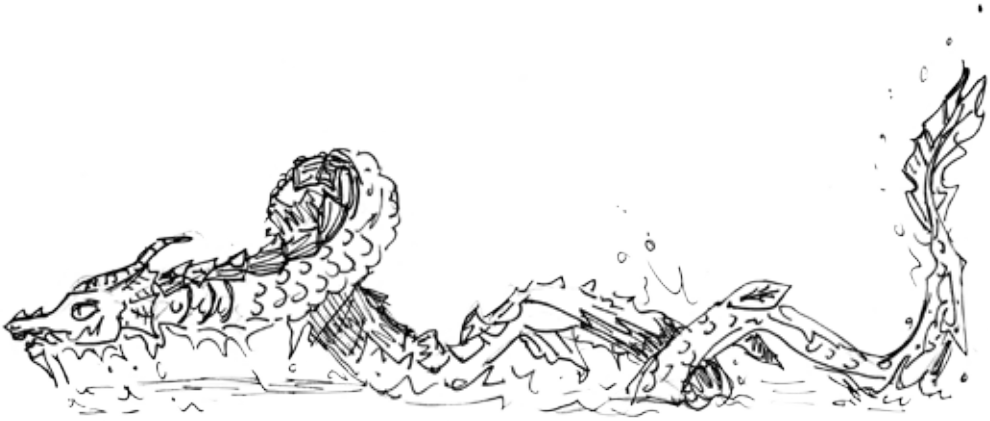
Name Level

Name Level,
or Companion tier,
or domain game,

Level ~8
up to 1M XP

is the traditional vision of what a D&D campaign matures into, established in the early days of the game when it was steeped in wargaming culture; this was the doctrinal position that Gary Gygax took in his game texts on the matter.

The idea is that high-level player characters, through great adventures that bring great fame, wealth, and influence, transition into being political leaders of communities, even entire polities, leaving their adventuring days behind and managing political factions in an intense game of thrones that combines social, economic, diplomatic and warfare dimensions in a way that kinda slides D&D into being more



of a traditional wargame, concerned with the conduct of military campaigns and grand strategy.

The higher tiers of D&D grow increasingly ephemeral and varied in practical implementation, with important branches of the game's development not necessarily even recognizing the idea of Name Level. I've benchmarked Name Level to appropriately begin sometime after 100 000 XP, continuing feasibly up to the 1 million XP mark, corresponding to a few character levels around 8 or so.

As far as I am concerned, this is still an open frontier of exploration for the game, with much room for establishing further conventions and content; play culture simply hasn't paid it that much attention yet. I think that Name Level is true in the sense of being a possible and natural transition from mid-levels adventuring, I just haven't witnessed it myself yet. If it's challenging to just "start a campaign at mid-levels", for this tier I would consider it outright impossible, as for me it is but a vague mirage still.

High Tier

High Level,
or Master tier,
or planar tier,
or xianxia tier,
or street-level superheroes,
or epic level,

Levels 8–12,
*up to 1*M XP

is something of an alternative to the Name Level as a vision of where the game goes after the mid-levels, or perhaps a statement on what comes after. Characters at this level of power and romantic stylization are more akin to superheroes or powerful wizards, or perhaps demigods, than adventurers.

I do not have any true knowledge of what scenarios at this tier should be like, except they apparently involve riding on dragons, shredding electric guitars, and generally just doing whatever the heck you want. Party structure would be naturally abandoned, I expect, in favor of an explicit hero + entourage model. I strongly suspect that a serious scenario necessarily develops high mechanical complexity by this point, partly because the scenario contents, player characters included, are so fantastic that the game requires heavy formalisms to allow players to quantify issues and operate the resolution processes. How much does a soul weigh, anyway, were you in the position to haul some out of Hades?

Insofar as High Level is real, mid-level play would either slide into this tier slowly or after the Name Level concerns grow tedious to the heroic player character, depending on whether the campaign seriously implements Name Level play. Traditional sources (highly suspect as they are) benchmark it at basically levels 10+.

Divine Ascension

Immortals game, divine tier, cosmic superheroes,

Levels 12+
1M XP and more

is an occasionally speculated even-higher-tier of the game where the player characters rise to positions of literal divine authority over the game world, facing new types of challenges and scenarios unique to a fantastic world of polytheistic gods; the particulars of this state and world are usually imagined as something akin to Olympian myths of ancient Greece, or the stories of Taoist Immortals, or cosmic superheroes like the Silver Surfer — which all does seem like it'd be a legit wargaming environment.

There are some game texts about the topic, but they are all highly idiosyncratic, in part because it's not that obvious for two D&D developers to agree about the direction the game should take at this point. Even just my suggesting 1 million XP as an appropriate threshold for divine ascension is more symbolic numerology than anything else.

Appreciating the big picture

The scope of D&D's campaign vision is truly immense, as those higher levels of attainment ostensibly require literal thousands of hours of **skilled** gameplay to actually achieve, building your scores up carefully in complex strategic patterns, guarding against setbacks, and constructing contingencies in case disaster strikes on the way to the stars. I cannot conceive of it without long years of work in simply achieving technical mastery of the game before attempting a serious push.

I have only ever attained mid-levels myself in real play, as a player or the Dungeon Master; higher tiers of play are so far theoretical to me, for all that I have opinions and hypotheses of how they would function.

Were the purpose and rewards of D&D contingent on reaching the "end", it would be a truly futile affair. Fortunately, the campaign arc of leveling is not the true core of the game, and its reward accrues on much smaller timescales. Still, it is interesting to consider the overall scope of what lies ahead, isn't it?

Party Management

In the wargaming way, we do not focus on creating an immersive fantasy persona that the player enjoys inhabiting; that's a different kind of roleplaying game altogether. In this game, player characters are unique circumstances of play, toolsets you use to overcome various scenarios, and lessons in what works and what doesn't. Character management logic is necessarily fairly different from most games.

The Character Stable

When we're figuring out what to play next in the campaign, often there are some reasons for you not to want to bring your "main guy" into the next scenario, so you just create a new character and play that instead! Over time this process comes out to a "stable", a store of characters that the player has created over time.

The reason to jump characters may be a whimsy of game fiction ("my guy doesn't like the adventure hook"), strategic on the part of the player ("this is a desperate heist, I don't want to risk it"), hard positioning thing ("my guy is recuperating from injuries and thus unavailable"), or anything else.

Character stables are a good thing because they reduce artifice in campaign maneuvering; you don't need to invent elaborate stories about why these same characters keep adventuring together even when you'd expect them not to.

Stables also make character losses more survivable because the player has fall-back positions.

In scenario formation, players have a subjective **right to play**, which means that the referee doesn't go out of their way to justify why the player can't field their character and join the fun. But the conceit of character stabling is there to form the ultimate fallback when negotiations stall: if it's difficult for some reason to convince your character to go on an adventure, make a new one who will. It is that easy.

Start at 1st level

New characters start at 1st level. This is important because it makes accomplished characters valuable and exceptional, and encourages natural variety in party composition. Modern D&D generally advises replacing dead characters with new characters of the same level, but that utterly ruins the great accomplishment of even reaching the 2nd level; don't do that.

When new characters start at 1st level, the campaign does not need to be conceived as a constant progression towards higher levels of power. Rather, the campaign consists of "runs" of advancement that inevitably end sooner or later. A sense of scale is retained when your play naturally varies over the level range, following the vagaries of adventurer fate. Characters who retire or die, and are replaced by new adventurers, are what keep the events real.

I question the existence of resurrection magic in the game. I question it heavily, and it has not generally been part of my

campaigns. To me, it seems to be nothing more than a way to transition from the wargaming way to a different game, one where player characters are "too big to fail".

Parties vary in level

If another player has a character at level 4, that doesn't mean that the game is failing when yours is at level 1. The game works just fine with a natural variety in this regard and is in fact more fun because you get to strategize over a variety of circumstances.

Note that the old school exponential character advancement math naturally ensures that lower level characters "catch up" when adventuring together with higher level ones, provided they survive. Character stables (varying adventuring party composition), character deaths (as well as various XP losses), and the exponential progression mean that the level hierarchy is not some permanent play-group pyramid. Sometimes you are at a lower level, and sometimes at a higher level than the rest of the party.

It is very natural in play to have the party with a single character of higher level, leading an entourage of 1st-levelers. That's how adventure fiction often plays out, and it's a fun set-up in play as well.

Party Roles

One of the unusual characteristics of D&D is that it defaults to a cooperative team exercise. Most games tend to have individual turns where everything else grinds to a halt while each player deliberates their own actions. In D&D most of the time the entire party maneuvers, and the players do not have turns.

What this implies for party management is that the players form a natural participation hierarchy where the more skilled and motivated players do most of the playing, while the shy and passive players are more along for the ride, contributing less to the decision-making. Some players find this frustrating because their turn never comes; they have difficulty realizing that the turn was inside them all along.

For most, though, my experience is that the natural activity hierarchy is a strength of the game. It allows newcomers to ease into the game with low-stakes participation, and nobody needs to sit the game out because of their skill level. If you don't feel like putting in too much effort today, you can just lean back and let the others play, while still nevertheless being fully present and available if something particularly challenging comes up. At the high end, the players can put as much effort and skill into it as they can without worrying about others keeping up.

While you can work on the team ethos and individual player skills by encouraging role swapping and trying new things, the game's nature is that everybody finds their own preferred way to participate. It would be ideal to let that happen.

Parties can be big

While I encourage limiting each player to a single player character *at a time*, nothing in particular prevents the adventurers from hiring non-player character allies: hirelings, retainers, henchmen, minions, sidekicks, whatever.

There is no game balance that would break from an investigation of the possibilities of forming a real adventuring company capable of tackling challenging expeditions. Real people do not engage in dangerous, uncertain projects in foreign parts with a party of three or four people, and the reasons for that would apply in the simulated gaming world as well.

The game's scoring logic naturally penalizes over-budgeting operations. Allowing players to have a real say in what they're fielding for any given scenario makes negotiated scenario balance easier to achieve, which makes for exciting gameplay.

I cannot say for certain, but my current belief is that at mid-tiers the adventuring party naturally shrinks back down; the adventures become far too dangerous for non-heroic party members, which leaves only the one player character per player again.

I like to think that the way dungeon fantasy imagines adventuring parties, as these intimate affairs of a couple of best friends and a nice elf girl, is specifically depicting mid-tier heroic adventurers. At low tier, madness.

Multiple Parties

With character stables, there is no reason whatsoever why the campaign would have to keep following the same "party" from scenario to scenario. To the contrary, it is common at mid-levels for parties to break up for all kinds of reasons, often leaving individual adventurers to form new parties (with new 1st level allies), so that all the players end up with multiple characters hanging out with different fellow adventurers. All part of the process.

The main campaign management reason to keep some throttle on this process of heroic adventurers spreading out into the setting is that it forces you to choose where to focus play and which adventurers to follow in detail. The players only have so much play time to devote to the process, after all. So the thing to do is to use summary downtime processes to define positioning and find adventures, and then move campaign attention between the variously interesting adventurers and parties as interest beckons.

When some adventurer goes do their own thing and we just never seem to get around to playing any further adventures with them for whatever reason, that's not such a problem: it's the natural consequence of us having something more interesting on our plate, week to week. They're essentially retired now, as we never seem to get around to having them adventure, yeah?

Player vs Player play

A natural consequence of the extended campaign ideal of "finding" adventuring opportunities based on how adventurers position themselves is that sometimes player characters end up on different sides of the same issue. One is hired by a king to run security, say, while the other is hired by a pretender to assassinate that king. Very fun situations, full of gaming potential, but also very intense for the players!

The technical issue with PvP play in D&D is that in the basic game the players learn to trust each other and work together against the merciless dungeon. So anything that throws this arrangement topsy-turvy can be deeply upsetting. It's even worse when a player decides to turn on an ally for bad reasons: bad strategy, bad portrayal of their adventurer. Because you're not playing with perfect people, sometimes skills fall short. It is understandably frustrating to be on the receiving end of a fit like that when it's so difficult to build success, and so easy to sabotage another player.

The one thing you shouldn't do, either as a character player or referee, is ambushing the other players with party betrayal. If you haven't explicitly talked about it in advance, then assume that it is not OK, and the other players are in fact assuming that the adventurers are "faction by definition" in the same sense that a football team is supposed to play together and not betray each other.

But then, on the other hand, PvP scenarios are really fun! This is how classical wargaming actually was structured: you

would have two players on opposite sides, with the referee acting as a neutral third party to adjudicate the maneuvers of the two sides against each other. I always try to make this work when a campaign suggests authentic PvP situations. But you must ask before just throwing yourself into it, I absolutely won't blame anybody for just assuming that the adventurers aren't allowed to betray each other.

A given campaign's table rules might allow or disallow "small betrayal" and "big betrayal", it's all fine as long as you hash it out with the group. I've refereed for parties that'd hold court martial with executions for traitors (entirely organic PvP, that is), and I've refereed for parties who explicitly forbid any kind of betrayal. Parties where characters steal from each other, and parties that engage in long campaign arcs of maneuver and counter-maneuver against each other. Player characters have been relinquished to be used as opposition force villains, and players have conspired with the referee to set up entire adventures for each other. They're all legit games, it's a good example of how you can set up wargaming scenarios with a different focus.

Campaign Setup

I encourage practitioners to treat the **campaign** as the basic unit of game development for D&D. The commercial history of the game has distorted this reality, encouraging us to think in terms of which game brand it is you're working with. "We are playing Advanced Dungeons & Dragons" should be a trivial gesture towards the kinds of rules tech you use, not the foundation of the practice.

The true foundation is that we are playing D&D, a wargame concerned with adventurous small unit commando fantasy warfare stuff, and other adventure fiction matters from pirates to spaceships. The game has certain fundamental technical conceits ranging from a combined referee-GM to party-based play to the use of "hit points", but that's all it is. Elevating the petty technicalities of edition over this foundation is missing the forest for the trees. And what may be worse: caring so very much about the game text blinds you to the house you should be building, your own campaign.

For gamers used to thinking in RPG culture ways, I would encourage you to think of your own campaign as "the game". Specifically, your campaign is the platform into which matters like the game setting and the game rules hang onto. You don't first choose to play AD&D, then choose to play Forgotten Realms, and then start a campaign. It's actually the other way around: you first decide to start a D&D campaign, titillated by various creative ideas, and you prepare to fulfill those ideas

by pulling together rules, setting lore, players, and other things. Give the campaign a name, I've found that this helps in treating it as the creative project it is.

But perhaps that comes after being at it for a while. Belay that, don't name your first campaign the moment you begin. See if it lights ablaze first, then name it for the most memorable thing from the early sessions. Or set it aside and start again, not every practice work deserves a name.

The important part is understanding your relationship to the game as that of an artisan or explorer working alongside the rest of us; not according to a set game text that determines what tribe you belong in, but by a shared ethos that determines what you work towards.

With that part clear, I'll share some basic ideas about how to kick a campaign into action. Just some practical suggestions. You'll find similar advice in the best game texts.

Don't be afraid to set up a basic campaign

I've found that the forward-leaning is real with excited new referees, which tends to mean that the game is being learned in an unnecessarily complicated way, hurrying too far too fast. This tendency goes for roleplaying in general, but in D&D specifically, it means a tendency to skip the clean basic game in favor of emulating ideas and practices of extended open-world games. Faking it when you can't do it for real.

Remember the basic D&D I described before, the linear game that begins at the dungeon entrance. The referee

prepares a single dungeon, with simple atomic interactions. Monsters in this room, a trap in this one. A random encounter table for the occasional corridor encounter. No complex multi-room interactions, those can emerge in play. Simple goals, mostly treasure-hunting.

That's a great game, though I completely understand if it isn't obvious to somebody who comes into roleplaying from a place of fantastic imagination and adventure. The dungeon thing seems so very drab. But, here's something you won't see unless you try it: that game is brutal! It is a game of death and despair, and of pushing your luck with extreme stakes. I'm not in the grips of nostalgia or irony when I say that it's fair fun to set up an adventurer party and send them into some hellhole to kick down a dungeon door, only to then try to be the first player to declare (scream) my retreat from the ghouls.

The basic game will swiftly teach absolute fundamentals: the importance of hit points, what experience points mean, and the way the game doesn't care about your feelings, only about your decisions. It would be very useful for success in more advanced D&D to first master the basic dungeon game.

You don't need to do much legwork in setting up a basic game. Just get a low-level dungeon, some basic rules set, and start playing. Fix things as you go. There's no reason why the basic campaign cannot grow with time into an extended game if that's what you want to do. Just keep saying yes to those opportunities to follow the diegetic logic of the game events into places as yet unexplored.

Own Your Campaign Premise

What you really need to start a campaign is an understanding of what kinds of things you want the campaign to be about, in terms of its wargaming exploration. Do you want to have daring swordfights? Space exploration? Wise wizards risking all to break laws of nature? Get a sense of that and build the campaign (setting, situation, rules) around it.

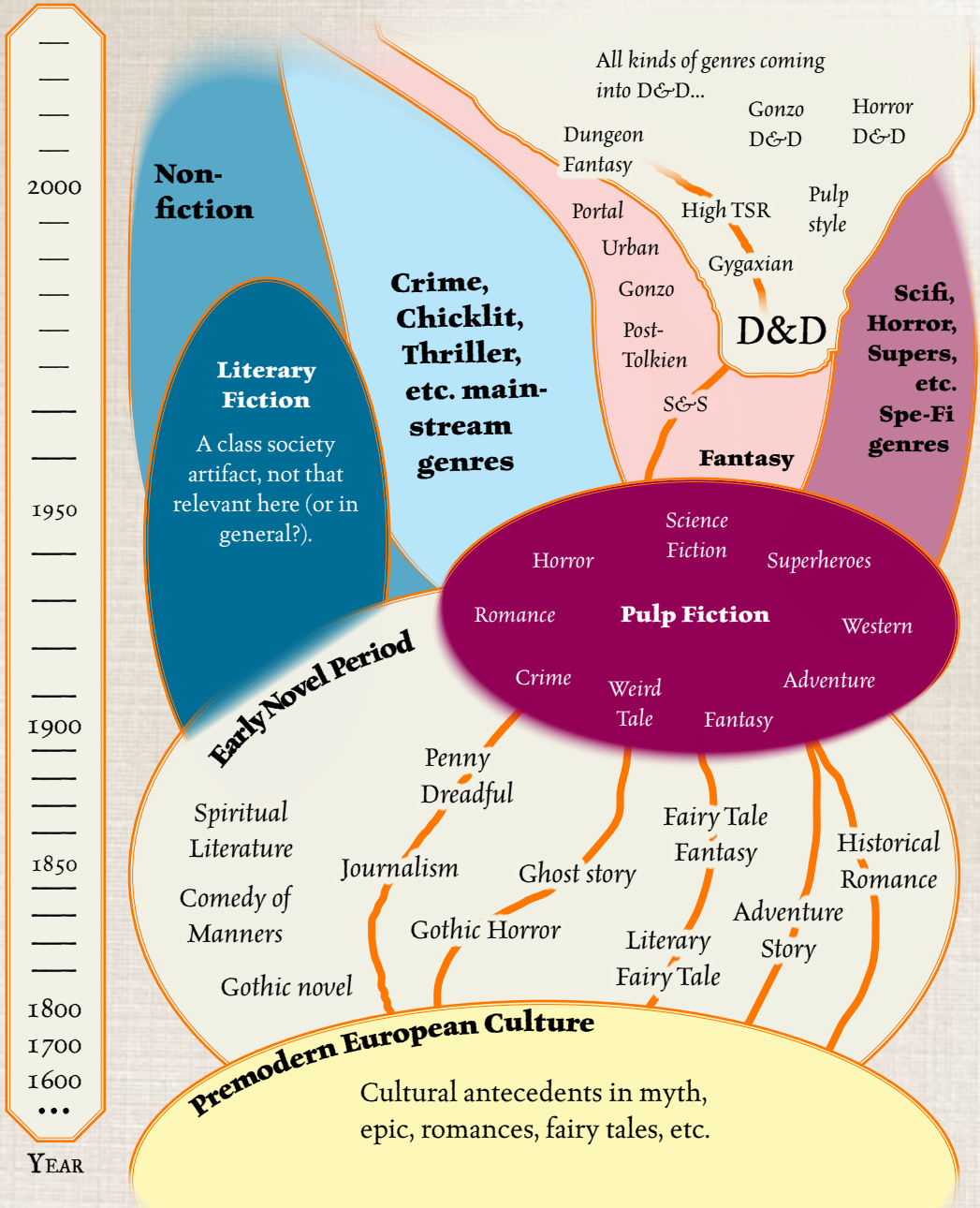
I would advise not trying to be too... all-embracing about it. The gaming community has historically encouraged you to think of your campaign in terms of trying to fit everything and the kitchen sink from the official rulebooks into the campaign. All of these character classes, all of these magic systems, and all of these monsters and magic items need to have a home. Ignoring that and focusing on what it is that you really want to do brings real dividends, though. You can always expand the campaign later.

For many, often, the substantial theme of the campaign is simply pulp fantasy adventuring. As I like to say: you're a footloose, cynical bastard with a sword in a primitive, romantic, and cruel world. What do you do, where do you go? There's adventure around every corner! That's the campaign that has so bewitched generations of gamers. Your campaign doesn't have to be any more specific or unique if that's what you want to do. I imagine everybody wants to do that a fair bit before even considering new vistas.

But, own that premise, whatever it is. It is your interest driving the game, not just what you read in some book.

A Summary Genre History

A GM setting up a campaign should have awareness of their location, direction and speed of travel in the noietic sphere of cultural history.



Start Small, Grow as you Go

Some commonly accepted wisdom in old school D&D is that a great campaign is usually not built top-down, but rather as the campaign proceeds. While it's possible for a master of the game to start with massive overarching principles and large-scale world-building that zooms down into the practical affairs of adventurers, that's not something you should try to do.

The game industry again misleads the hobbyist here in a difficult-to-justify way. Commercial setting packages and campaign frameworks generally suggest the idea that great campaigns have massive overhead: literally hundreds of pages of campaign world material organically referenced for play. This may be a roleplaying game, but it is not this game.

If you're starting with a basic campaign, you only need basic rules and a dungeon to get into action. Everything else can be built as you go, session by session, as you go:

Add more dungeons.
Give the base town some character.
In fact, detail some NPCs to interact with.
Create an overland map.
Set up wilderness adventures, and urban adventures.
Grow the world.

What you would really want to have for this is a few clear arch themes that you hew to as you go, but even that is less important than keeping your prep simple and concrete.

The Hexcrawl Campaign Seed

For referees wanting to kickstart an extended overland campaign from session one, here's a simple tried and true structural recipe favored in old school gaming. We're assuming a hexcrawl technical context here, but you can do a similar setup with other kinds of overland travel and exploration rules, too.

1) Take an empty sheet of hex paper and place a normal town typical of the setting in the middle. Give the place a name. This will be the base town that the campaign begins in, so it's populated by some people with adventurous potential.

Draw some terrain in the surrounding hexes, just whatever comes to mind. Maybe let's assume that the hexes are each 6 miles wide unless you have other opinions. Figure out what the town lives on, and signify terrain accordingly. Color in all the hexes around the town.

2) Choose three low-level adventure modules you like. It's good for them to offer variety in terms of size, difficulty, and theming. Adventures that you want to exist in the campaign setting, obviously.

Place the chosen adventures in hexes surrounding the base town, 1–5 hexes away from town. Whatever placement makes sense for the adventure and terrain.

Draw in the terrain around the adventure locations as well, filling in the hexes they are in and any hexes surrounding them.

3) Construct a base lore package for the players about the starting town and its surroundings. Put in some fun literary color, like a reference to some regional history or whatnot. Pull on those initial adventure modules: what do they assume about the surrounding world?

Write about those initial adventure locations in the lore package, provide "adventure hooks". The goal is not to hide the adventures, but rather to present them to the players in a flavourful way. Tell about reasons to go explore those locations, and about obvious kinds of peril that rumors about these locations might warn of.

4) Start the game! Get some adventurers together to form a party, and while the players are preparing the party, tell them about the setting. Give them an empty hex sheet to draw their own map as you tell them about the world. Let them make their own notes about the adventuring opportunities, ask questions, and so on.

When the players choose which of those adventures to tackle first, you're well on your way! Just keep adding material to the campaign setting and letting things — adventurers, wondrous locations, organizations, monsters — bounce against each other.

That's how I prepped our "historical fantasy" campaign in 2011: plopped down the base town and the adventures Tomb of the Iron God, Tower of the Stargazer and I think Temple of the Ghoul in the environs. The rest, choosing where to go and what to do, was left to the adventurers.

Maintaining a Campaign Long-Term

D&D campaigns are super-long compared to many other roleplaying games. A hundred sessions is not particularly exceptional. In any other game, I consider 20 sessions to be crazy-long!

I don't actually have any particularly clever observations to make about how to get the game to go long; for us, it just happened when I put the right pieces together. There's this monumental, nigh-incomprehensible challenge of mathematics and war that rises from the simple rules and premise, and it asks you: can you even get to the 2nd level in this thing? If you hear that call, and then see those 15 XP you managed in the first session, and start thinking about what could have been done better, then that's going to take you far. If not, then perhaps it isn't the game for you.

Of course, you want to put the practical things right: weekly sittings (4 hours is good) on a regular calendar, open and safe social practices, good hospitality, open call for new participants, and constantly rolling teaching practices. It's not different from any other hobby club, just this one happens to be practicing the deepest game of all.

One difference in the creative dynamics between the wargaming way and other types of adventure gaming I've seen is that the traditional RPG campaign exists sustained by a continuous plot, while the wargame D&D campaign is sustained by that terrible challenge. When we played a 50-session campaign of 4e D&D a couple of years ago, and the

plot came to its conclusion, it was a day of satisfaction and joy; it wouldn't have occurred to me to keep going. To the contrary, the last third of the campaign was already a heated race towards the end, pacing the plot of the grand fantasy epic.

A challenge-based wargaming campaign doesn't usually have such a plot priority. The campaign, when built into a healthy routine, exists more as a social contract between the club members. It's the stage for play, a **platform** onto which the group can set various adventurous scenarios. Instead of being like a novel series, the D&D campaign is like a community theater stage: there to be used to stage wargaming.

The implication is, of course, that campaigns can be put away and revived, participants can change, and there is no single character that must live for the campaign to keep going; the campaign lives in the developed rules, setting, and thematic understanding of its subject matter.

Scenario Formation

A prepared, operational campaign is a **platform**. It consists of a group and a schedule that form a play space. The players set up a setting and characters. This is a D&D campaign.

How is it a platform? In the sense that once the campaign is ready, it can be used to present adventures, or to use a more generic wargaming term, **scenarios**. As long as the campaign persists as a social and creative construct, it is available for the players as a potential platform to launch new challenges.

The process by which the campaign moves from being ready to play to entering a specific scenario is of great technical interest, as this is the stage during which much about the ultimate fate of the adventure is being determined: how many adventurers are exploring? What are the perils? Arguably the correlation of forces is what ultimately determines the band of possible outcomes for any adventure before we bring actual player maneuvers into it: you can only do so much with the material you have on hand.

The proper attitude towards scenario formation involves a type of exploration play that allows natural campaign events and the strategic sensibilities of the players to inform the parameters of play. The traditional understanding of this matter revolves heavily around the concept of **game balance**; I hope to show that an a priori benchmarking of this sort is not necessary, and is in fact harmful for the wargaming way. The game will be better if the referee and players bring their

own ideas of possible adventures to the table and negotiate the terms of engagement with a sense of campaign continuity and realistic strategic goal-setting. It works just like real-world strategic planning.

Dynamic Balancing

One of the most fundamental design choices that D&D has undergone in its historical evolution is resolving the **balancing problem** by reducing the game into a skirmish combat boardgame; by treating the game as a series of combat encounters it is possible to calculate how many enemies of what type provide an "appropriate" challenge for a given adventuring party. The solution is unacceptable for the wargaming way, as the responsibility for the outcome moves from the players to the game system, and simulating a fictional scenario gets replaced with a formally defined boardgame.

The "balancing problem" is this: as the game is not fun when adventuring is too easy or too hard, how does the referee ensure that the level of challenge is just right? Early D&D largely runs on **precedent benchmarking** when it addresses the question at all: an appropriate challenge for a 1st level party is an encounter with 3d6 goblins because that's how it's developed to be. An adventure for a 4th level party is known to be such due to a combination of eyeballing and comparing to prior examples.

However, there is a more fundamental approach to the conundrum to be had. **Dynamic balancing** is an approach

that arises from the explorative aspect of wargaming. What if, instead of assuming that the referee is responsible for game balance, we allow the group to discover scenario balancing through the activity of play itself?

The simplest illustration of this principle is allowing the adventuring party to choose which scenario, under which conditions, they are willing to tackle. This is a traditional part of extended open world D&D: adventurers discover opportunities to adventure, research these opportunities, and make choices. This is absolutely different from having the referee choose the scenario, most fundamentally in that a referee who has prepared several adventures has no structural motivation to convince the players to engage any particular one.

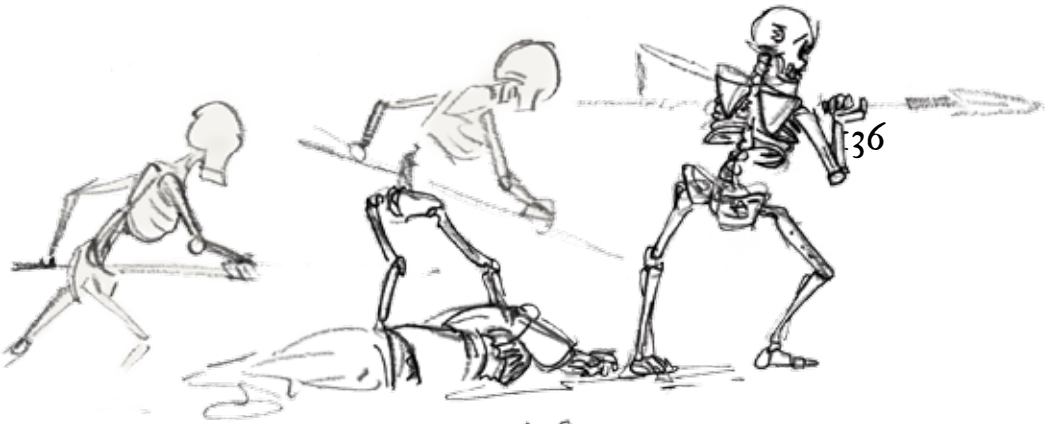
The kind of play that occurs in the between-scenarios exploratory space is best understood as **scenario negotiation**. It may well actually be an explicit negotiation, the play group plainly talks out what kind of scenario they would like to play next. If I set up a court intrigue adventure, would you like to play it? But the negotiation may as well be implicit, subsumed into the low-stakes exploration of the campaign setting.

Besides choosing the scenario, a group allowed to explore the setting and develop stories in between scenarios will also be able to engage in a gentle tug of war over the **resources** the party brings to the scenario they choose. Can we afford the logistics tail to reach this target dungeon? We should haggle for more of an advance from the quest-giver. If the ref grants us 10 hirelings, we can tackle this.

A referee who prepares for players to accept or refuse their scenario material will also be procedurally prepared for adventurers to **retreat** from a scenario underway. This is, again, a massive dynamic balancing factor. Variations include such concepts as partial success and sub-goals, all of which enable a party with dim prospects to dynamically revise their goals in the scenario to accord with the facts on the ground. What was supposed to be a standard dungeon clearing operation may instead become an Aliens-esque fighting retreat, and a very exciting and successful session of play despite being "too hard" by external measure.

And if it should so happen that the scenario proves too easy after all the haggling, well, sometimes the players do indeed outmaneuver the game world and the campaign premise (and the referee, in a way), and achieve victory on the strategic level. Good for them, and besides, an easy scenario may be escalated when the situation develops, and it can be executed summarily, with a faster play procedure, so you can move on from an easy adventure to the follow-up challenges.

Which dynamic balancing factors are in play in a campaign depends a lot on the overall campaign structure, but even a basic D&D campaign where maneuvering begins at the dungeon door should, at the very minimum, have the option of retreat. I say this plainly: without player-controlled retreat,



the game is broken; you might as well drop the players too and have the GM play on their own, as they are both choosing what's behind the door and forcing you to open it.

You can't ever mess up too badly as the referee in choosing what scenarios to present if the campaign is completely serious about letting the players call it off and preserve their beloved character assets should they conclude that the scenario doesn't seem feasible to them. The balancing problem can only raise its ugly head if you disempower the players from affecting their own destiny: if the referee does indeed choose what you'll play, how you'll play, and what choices must be done in play, then it is on their head if the dice roll awry and a beloved character dies — you made it too hard! So then, naturally, the solution to *that* is to start cheating on the dice to ensure that you'll only get pleasant outcomes.

Allowing dynamic balancing to occur by actually enabling the players to make strategic decisions, even if it is just the decision to retreat, is a fundamental necessity for the real challenge to survive.

Negotiating outside the scenario box

A common misunderstanding of the neutral arbitrator role of the referee is that you must be strict at all times. That's what consistent and fair adjudication means, right? Being strict. However, the actual structure of the game is more complex than that, and while many referees seem to grasp the creative dynamics naturally, sometimes there is cognitive confusion:

why do I feel like the game cannot possibly function if I keep being objective, simulative all the time? It's because it can't.

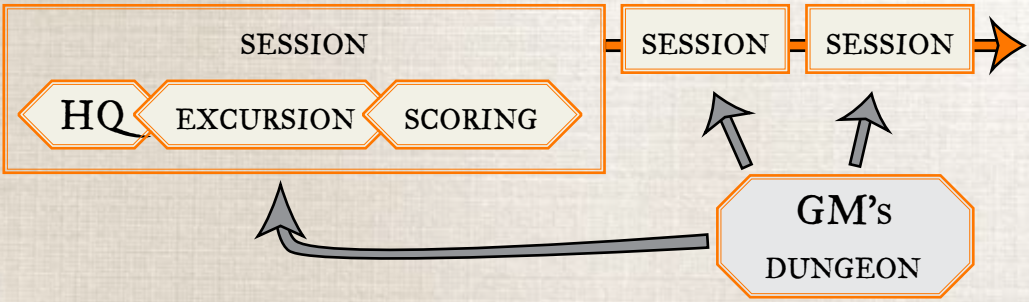
An extended campaign necessarily has two distinct phases that it switches between as we keep playing. One is the **scenario play** that we do when everything is set up and the hunt is on; the players maneuver smartly and the ref adjudicates strictly because we are now playing for real. The other phase of play is what happens in between the scenario play, the **negotiation phase** so to say: we haven't quite established everything for the scenario to begin yet, and so we are still exploring, still negotiating what the next challenge will be like.

The player roles are fairly different in scenario play and in the negotiation phase of the campaign, so being explicitly aware of the shift can be very useful for improving your play. As a player, your job during a scenario is to think and maneuver to win the scenario. During the negotiation phase, there is nothing real to win or lose, there are no stakes on the table. This enables the players to maneuver more freely, to negotiate the terms of the next challenge with the referee.

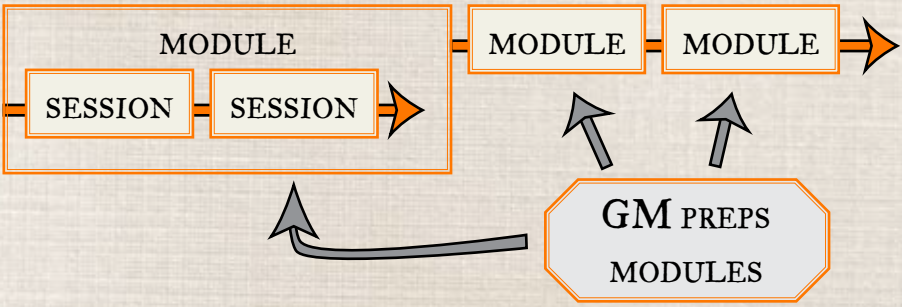
And similarly, on the referee side: during scenario play, you are strict and fair, and play the situation as it falls. You don't fudge probabilities or merely assume that things fall together in a convenient way. But when the game enters a negotiation phase, you as well have vastly greater discretion: the goal is **scenario formation**, and it cannot possibly happen if you pretend to be an unbiased machine.

The three historically common campaign structures used in old school D&D. Consider how negotiated balance can be accomplished in these structures.

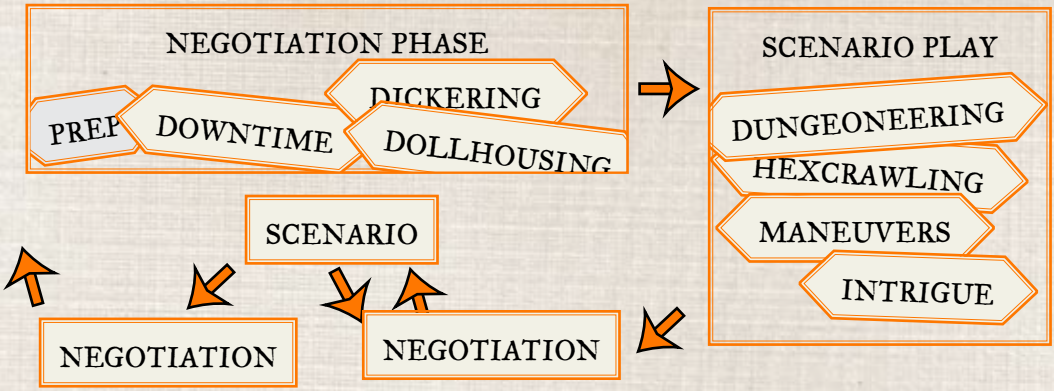
BASIC EXCURSION MODEL *The original megadungeons were played this way.*



BASIC MODULE PEARLSTRING *Adventure modules teach playing this way.*



ADVANCED NEGOTIATED SANDBOXING *When the game gets deep.*



An example to illustrate the difference between the phases of play:

Hiring mercenaries mid-adventure: If adventurers decide during a scenario that they cannot handle the challenge alone, that they need help, the referee will presumably determine the availability of mercenaries in the local settlements by simulating the situation; there could be help available at prices the adventurers can afford, or not. If not, maybe this is a loss then, and the party should give up?

Hiring mercenaries in scenario negotiation: When you're considering a new adventure with the group, and the players conclude that they need to find help before tackling this scenario, it behooves the referee to suggest that mercenary hirelings are available at affordable terms. Not at terms that trivialize the scenario for the referee, but to an extent that makes it possible for play to actually occur. If you cannot bend this much, then we must play a different scenario.

As you can see, the appropriate stance that everybody takes during the two phases of play is very different. During a scenario, you're concerned with what is possible, what is likely, and what happens. Outside of a scenario, you're more working with what is meaningful, what is fun, and what the group wants to do. Applying the in-scenario thinking to exploration play results in unnecessary meandering, and applying the exploratory mindset to the actual scenario results in biased adjudication that cannot distinguish between good and bad tactics.

It's possible and in a certain way sensitive to perceive the two campaign phases as the referee relaxing and tightening his oversight according to the situation: when the important thing is establishing the scenario, you perform **challenge coordination**, and when the important thing is resolving the scenario, you perform **strict adjudication**. The experienced referee may sometimes switch between these two phases quite quickly and often, as play dips in and out of various challengeful situations.

Another way to look at this is that the negotiation phase pits the desires of players (for what they want to do, what they want for their characters) against the desires of the GM (how they want to acknowledge the campaign setting, what kind of scenario they want to play), while actual play pits the warcraft of the players against the modeled facts of the scenario. It's not players-vs-GM in either case, not really, but the former is surely more of a negotiation, while the latter is more of a clash.

It may also be useful to visualize the campaign structure in terms of "scenario boxes", with play negotiations meandering through the campaign space, finding and building various boxes, all of which correspond to some specific gameable, interesting challenges that the group perceives in the campaign fiction. And then play dips inside one of those boxes, the referee takes the gloves off, the players put their game faces on, and actual play begins. The play occurs inside the box, and occasionally you come out, loosening up the procedures.

In a complex, organic campaign, the boxes may of course overlap and encompass each other. If your character runs a company on the brink of bankruptcy, and your only chance is a risky expedition to find an obscure treasure, you're running two boxes, one inside the other: the challenge of the expedition, inside the challenge of the business management. Being aware of the boxes helps retain awareness of what your task in the game is, moment to moment. Sometimes strict, sometimes cooperative.

Emergent Discovery

If play consists of two phases, the negotiation phase and the scenario play, and the negotiation phase is supposed to be this touchy-feely "everybody gets what they want" thing, then does that mean that we don't need to use rules and game state tracking in between scenarios? After all, if what we're *trying to do* is set up the next scenario, what does it matter how much money the adventurers have, or how much political favor, or where they get that ship? If they can't get a ship, then they can't sail to the adventure island, and then we don't have a game, so why bother worrying about where the ship comes from?

This observation is entirely true to an extent! Basic D&D specifically will actually benefit overall from the players having a clear sense of what "matters" in this sense, and what does not need to. You're playing a scenario when you're in the dungeon, and while there it matters a hell of a lot how much of anything (even breathable air) you have. But when you

return to the base town from the dungeon, what does actually matter at that point? Living adventurers will recuperate in time, and then you can go back into the dungeon. The wealth you bring out matters for XP scoring, but it doesn't really do anything in a strategic sense: you're still going back into the dungeon, and you're doing it with roughly the strategic positioning that you'd be doing anyway. You're not going to make meaningful changes by strategic maneuver. That's what it means for the game to be basic in structure.

To be explicit, this is actually how you're supposed to set up adventures in basic campaigns that do not include playable strategic operations: the referee offers the party an adventure at the adventure island, and then outright decides that for scenario set-up convenience, an NPC decides to ship the adventurers to the location. It's a cut-scene to get the scenario started, don't worry about it.

And likewise, when adventurers bring wealth back from the dungeon: the game has a culture of mealy-mouthed step-dancing around the question of whether that money matters. Can my character purchase a healing potion with this money or not? Can he buy a hundred? A +1 magic weapon? The basic game's answer should really be no, money doesn't really matter, everybody starts a new dungeon at *roughly* the same position no matter if they throw away their money or spend it wisely. You don't actually get to maneuver in between dungeons.

But of course, that's not how things *always* go in D&D. A character gets rich in the dungeon and the players calculate how much an entire inn costs, just for the hell of it, and find

out that this guy has enough money to buy his own inn. Dream occupation! So they'll actually retire from adventuring to run an inn instead. It's all between-adventures funny play, not a serious challenge. Just a bit of fun before the player creates a new adventurer to go on the next trip. But it did remove a character from play. That's a real consequence.

The point is that things can happen in the negotiation phase, important things in the sense that they inspire the group's campaign direction. A circus comes to town, it's just a throwaway comment by anybody, and an addition to the tapestry of narration; yet somehow the referee gets inspired to run a "Circus of Crime" adventure, seizing on the detail and pitting the adventurers against evil clowns. What started as low-stakes loose ideation emerges into a serious(?) scenario

That's why established, powerful campaigns tend to run fairly sticky world simulation even between actual scenarios: tracking the calendar, party finances, wider geography and all kinds of other things that are not directly scenario-pertaining makes for a lush undergrowth of inspiration in actually negotiating the next adventure. How else would you ever end up wandering a dungeon naked and drunk, if not because the downtime events after the last adventure strongly suggested something along those lines? Allowing the strategic campaign state to inspire the adventure planning is the path of inspiration.

The Necromancer

Our original historical fantasy campaign started in 2011 and kept up for a hundred sessions (exact, weirdly) before various real-life concerns shook the group up. One of the more memorable adventures during that time was the saga of Voldemort the Necromancer, starting around session #66 and continuing for a dozen sessions or so. I thought back then, and still do, that it was a fairly good example of what organic sandbox campaign developments actually look like. Instead of a series of adventure modules tackled one at a time, it's more like a complicated weave of emergent concerns.

I'll sketch a quick picture of how the events of the Voldemort saga arose and concluded. This was all cleanly executed in the wargaming way, so even if the events may at times seem dramatized, they were arrived at via situation modeling and dynamic play choices; the only plans involved were campaign seeding, adventurer maneuvers, and opforce countermaneuvers.

Obviously, a lot of detail goes into just one session of play, so this is necessarily mostly going to focus on the structural big picture instead of the moment to moment maneuvers.

Session #66: The adventuring party was at loose ends after their last adventure; Chaplain Rolf (Cleric 1), striving to make good with the local bishopric, heard disconcerting rumors of necromantic worship in a remote village. It was Insidious, a

fairly straightforward low-tier adventure module I was introducing.

The first session was mainly consumed by preliminary maneuvers in traveling to the locality, interviewing commoners, and discovering the abandoned manor of the last burgomeister. There was an encounter with stirges.

#67: A couple of core players visited me a few times over the week to prep the actual session with some low-stakes scouting and mapping actions in the less interesting parts of the manor. The party started the actual session well-positioned for immediate action.

The party at this time had a 3rd-level fighting-man, 2nd-level ranger-type, and a 4th-level cleric in addition to the 1st-level guys, so no big deal clearing out the orcs for the most part. Encountering the 10th-level Necromancer hiding out underneath the manor house came as a sudden and rude surprise!

The party Fighter was C*harmed* initially, which was just the start of the difficulties; the second assault on the Necromancer's lair almost resulted in a total party kill, and would have if not for the combat cleric Juanita and his enchanted strength. The party had brought in a 3rd level Elf Paladin to replace the Charmed Fighter; Varaniel the Elf fell from paladinhood that night, failing to stop Juanita from bashing the Necromancer to death with his bare hands.

Afterwards, the party discovered the Necromancer's spellbook, a great treasure for an emerging mid-tier party

seeking after the mysteries of the occult. We found that the Necromancer's name was "Voldemort"

Significantly, this was the first time the campaign rules produced a relic from the death of a leveled character; Voldemort dropped a skull pendant that Elf Varaniel took for his own after the murder.

#68: We did a mid-week solo session with Timo, the player of Varaniel the Elf, establishing that Varaniel was indeed using the reliquary pendant left behind by the Necromancer in his spell research. Varaniel was not always an Elf (he underwent soul transmigration to escape a cursed disease, earlier), so while possessing the Eladrin Might, he hardly knew how to wield his magical potential.

I'd rolled for the nature of Voldemort's relic, and of course, fate favored it being a phylactery, or a Horcrux as the kids call it; Timo was well read on Harry Potter, so yeah, we were on the same page here.

We modeled the influence that the Necromancer's Horcrux would wield over Varaniel's actions over between-adventures downtime, establishing that he was soon inspired to escape into the night with his mysterious new manservant "Gregor" (the guy just popped up uninvited a few weeks after the Necromancer's death, completely normal development) the Wererat.

Varaniel himself was convinced that he was questing to find a shortcut to magical power. We the players knew that he was being subtly influenced by the pendant, and by Gregor's

advice. Varaniel was soon busy hiring guides and traveling into the wilderness, seeking nothing less than the dread nameless cult site of Death Frost Doom.

#69: A slow beat session, following the party's continuing attempts at finding and solving small fry adventures. Neither Timo (Varaniel's player) nor Peitsa (Juanita's player) were with us, and the campaign's spearpoint adventurer Hans Krüger wasn't yet ready to begin his Italian campaign, so something small was indicated.

The party ultimately ended up following an old lead (for some reason they thought that an outlaw band's planning sheets would still be current information 15 sessions later) and stumbling upon some natural caverns by accident. The most noteworthy part of the session was when one of the adventurers got court-martialed and sentenced to death for perfidious cowardice by the rest of the party.

#70: Another solo session with Varaniel in between the regular meetings. Varaniel and his trusty retainer Gregor were quite self-satisfied at "finding" the ancient Duvan'Ku shrine they were looking for in the mountains. Gregor obviously serves Voldemort the Necromancer, and unknown to Varaniel, is working towards said worthy's imminent resurrection.

#71: Timo was missing again (scheduling, partial inspiration for those solo sessions in the first place), but we had the rest of the core crew. I had sketched out a really dumb one-page dungeon about time travel and cavemen discovering fire, so with players amenable to a complete change of pace, we did

that for one session. The wiser players didn't send their best characters, and indeed, none of the four braves sent into the past returned.

At the end of the session Juanita, a core character in the party's attempts at base-building, finally discovered that Varaniel the Elf was missing; him going on a mysterious private journey wasn't that strange, but when Juanita found Voldemort's spellbook missing as well, he *certainly* managed to connect the dots!

#72: A third solo session for Varaniel the Elf. Varaniel descended into the maw of the nameless cult site. He was very brave, perhaps confused, and immeasurably confident that his magical career was in high bloom. Gregor the henchman was encouraging, but betrayed no overt knowledge of this vile place.

Varaniel followed the susurrus unerringly and, as it happened, the preserved head of Voldemort, alongside his grimoire and the Horcrux amulet, enabled the pair to pass into the holy of holies of the temple.

Timo totally expected Gregor to betray him at a key moment, and he wasn't expected to "play stupid" in any way, but the timing of the assault surprised him, and the magical curse of the high altar caught Varaniel unawares. Gregor the Wererat knew that one of the two would have to die for Voldemort to live again, and he didn't intend to be it.

Varaniel's one huge flaw as an adventurer and hero has, since suffering a divine curse for temple-robbing in session

#8, been his atrocious physical stats. He was hardly able to resist the Wererat and prevent himself from being sacrificed upon the foul altar!

#73: The party had discovered Varaniel's betrayal or possible bewitchment (the jury was out on that one — the same jury that had sentenced Vengeance number-whatever, one of their own, to death a few sessions ago) at the end of the last session. The adventurers were in high dudgeon, the players excited at the sudden thrust of player-vs-player maneuvers. Timo rolled a new character to join in the hunt, not wanting to bring his still-Charmed Fighter.

The players were in the dark about what had happened, and I and Timo obviously didn't reveal anything. The session evolved into a tense chase as the party traveled from fantasy-Bavaria to fantasy-Holland, looking for the fortunately fairly recognizable Eladrin form of Varaniel's. Various clues left in the wake of his earlier passing helped the party figure out their way to Death Frost Doom.

The party traveled up the mountain, explored the surface features, and had the common sense to find out that a duo reminiscent of their description had descended the mountain just two days ago. The players made the very smart decision of not messing with DFD any more at this point and instead chose to continue pursuing Varaniel and that dangerous, blasphemous grimoire.

The chase, in quick action, continued across fantasy-Holland, climaxing finally in Amsterdam, where the party

located Varaniel-cum-Voldemort just a day before his ship would depart the harbor for faraway lands. Unfortunately, three of the five adventurers got distracted in Amsterdam (they basically started their own carnival for some reason?), which meant that Juanita and Yoreel (Ranger 3) ended up cornering the born-again Necromancer on their own, under-strength.

The Momentous Finale

The rest of session #73 took something like 15 minutes of fictional time, consisting of minute-long combat rounds. The fight was a 10th-level AD&D wizard and a 3 HD Wererat against a slowly, densely developed 4th-level clerical saint and a 3rd-level ranger companion.

Unfortunately, Yloreel left his four fighting dogs outside the inn, as the players attempted a stealthy assault. They were uncertain still as to what exactly had happened with Varaniel; they hoped to reason things out. Voldemort had full control of Varaniel's body, and Gregor the Wererat obviated the surprise by slipping out of the common room and hastening to warn his Master of the approaching adventurers.

Voldemort of course hated Juanita, his murderer, with the fury of a truly evil villain. His last death in the hands of the brutal "better dead than evil" saint was slow and agonizing.

The Necromancer opened with a *Stinking Cloud* spell, confirming for the players that Varaniel had Voldemort's repertoire and intent to kill. Juanita made the fateful decision

to dash through the cloud instead of retreating, seeking a quick and decisive take-down. Seeking the schwerpunkt of the conflict, so iconically like Peitsa. Yoreel couldn't help but back Juanita up, while Gregor the Wererat *Feigned Death* inside the room to seize surprise later.

The local culture of play is not at all steeped in standard D&D lore, and even mid-tier spells are rare; the *Stinking Cloud* is far more dangerous than the players realized, and almost finished the fight right there. Juanita managed to rush towards the Necromancer through the cloud, blinded by the burning gas, but stumbled on furniture and allowed the Necromancer to cast his *Shocking Grasp*.

However, as mentioned above, Juanita was game-mechanically *dense* in that peculiar way only slowly developed characters are. He had a second heart (and +1 HD) from uniting with his own doppelganger back in session #4 of the campaign; the unnatural constitution allowed him to overcome the cardiac arrest.

This was the first time the baroque combat rules that our campaign homebrew had developed were really, truly put through their paces in full desperation. Juanita soaked a second *Shocking Grasp*, redlining lethally, but kept going with lucky saves, intent on breaking the Necromancer with his own two hands, like he did before. Juanita's main saintly boon was his *Hideous Strength*, so it was obviously that or nothing when it came to breaking an abomination of a wizard in twain.

During the third round of combat, Wererat Gregor surprised Yoreel the Ranger from behind and then threw himself on

the utterly exhausted Juanita when he saw his Master being broken by bare hand. Gregor managed the unthinkable and got through Juanita's holy rage, ripping the saint's throat before Yoreel put him down.

The fight itself took just five minutes of fictional time, but the "death opera" at the end extended for something like eight combat rounds as Juanita lay there dying of his wounds. The players didn't know for sure who was alive or dead, or who would recover first.

It was the first time we had a truly developed long-term character dying on us, so the focus was entirely on Juanita. We tried all the strings we possibly could, extending his life with various constitution and willpower draws, first aid, magics, and prayers. The Son of God appeared for Juanita in a vision, but unfortunately had no divine miracle for him; it was time for him to go, after vanquishing the great evil, if perhaps not the one he had imagined to be his destiny. (Juanita had been gearing up to tackle an evil paganic demigod plaguing the region, the Dullahan.) "You have done more than could be asked of any single mortal man. Be ready to perish and rise up where the angels dwell", according to my notes.

So of course Juanita denied salvation in the faint hopes of surviving his last save against system shock from blood loss; he'd rather take a bonus to the save than an invitation to Heaven. (Adventurers, eh?)

Yoreel failed to save the life of his friend, who with his torn-out throat was unable to swallow healing elixirs. The Amsterdam

peace patrols arrived soon after, confiscating everything and holding Yoreel in custody for four months before letting him go.

The players were the most pissed at the Republic confiscating Varaniel/Voldemort's personal effects, not to speak of the Church claiming Juanita's remains and gear. The poor hero had broken his cloister rule and escaped the direct orders of his bishop the preceding summer, so he was considered legally to be a ward of the Church. This would later result in an "amusing" follow-on adventure as the adventurers started suspecting Juanita's corpse, entombed in a catacomb, of birthing his still-living doppelganger upon the world. Plus, all his magical gear just sitting in some dusty tomb, come on.

The party would never finish Juanita's vision of setting up a meaningful center of magical scholasticism (for adventuring benefits, of course) in a stable headquarters for the rising party. The party would never free fantasy-Bavaria from the antiquated terrors of the Dullahan.

That adventure was of course important to us in how it broke the strategic thrust of the adventuring party and lost us two mid-tier PCs.

The main reason I tell this story, though, is that I think it is a fairly good example of the way individual adventure modules and emergent developments get woven together by the referee, creating a complex strategic field upon which the adventurers maneuver. The outlined eight sessions involved four different adventure modules whirling in and out of

focus, with the ultimately most decisive action having almost nothing to do with any single one of them.

Notably, the campaign survived emotionally from these losses; both Timo and Peitsa went on to play other characters, and we didn't shy away from similar high stakes scenarios later on. At least this group, back then, could play D&D with very high stakes, and not completely fall apart at a major setback.

Refereeing Fundamentals

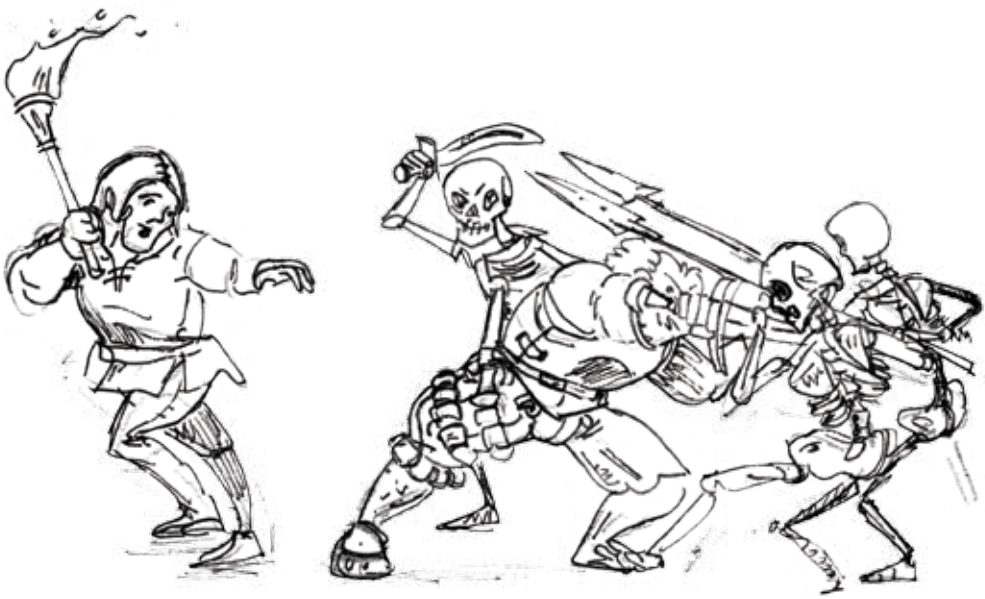
D&D rules texts have from the start contained an intractable methodological error that experienced gamers know to account for, but that keeps tripping up newcomers. The error is in the way the great constellations of rules are presented as something *important*: it is imperative for the game that you study these rules, and that you apply them perfectly. And if the game is not as fulfilling as it should be, the fault is either in you for not applying the rules correctly, or in the rules for not being the Perfect Rules, so better go out and buy some more in the hope of finding that one true game. It is a broken cultural institution.

Some roleplaying games do actually operate off a fairly immutable systemic chassis, and those games do usually have fairly good rules, but D&D in the wargaming way explicitly does not: the **simulative priority** of the game plainly means that where your understanding of the fictional circumstance differs from the rules, the rules give way. The apt and proper resolution of the scenario has a methodological right of way over whatever might be written in some damn fool rulebook.

The great Matt Finch phrased this principle as "Rulings, Not Rules", meaning that the actual resolution procedure used in real play is not a bare application of a rule written down in a book. Rather, it is the referee's task to consider the simulation as a whole and make an unbiased **ruling** about the situation at hand.

Clever rules and rulings are at the heart of the simulative gaming medium, the elements you use to build the interface that the players use to touch the virtual, imaginary spaces. In the wargaming way, these interfaces arise from the fiction: the Ogre is inhumanly strong and *therefore* it gains a bonus to a feat of strength.

The referee's task is to lead the group's charge in tackling the immensely complex task of apt and proper simulation; is not the world a complex and chaotic place? The task is never perfectly performed, but you can be satisfied by doing well under the circumstances, and with achieving a consistent simulation that addresses the cogent issues of the scenario. If the game is about the use of cavalry screens to confound enemy scouting, then accomplishing a constellation of rules and rulings that catches the particulars of how that works is enough.



To the basics

A D&D referee might wish to take the so-called **free kriegsspiel** for a whirl just to get a feel for the underlying fundamental transaction that all wargame rules reach for. I myself found a clear and cogent explanation of how free kriegsspiel works in Engle Matrix games, by Chris Engle, but good entry-level texts for the topic are only ever growing more common.

Free kriegsspiel play is essentially exactly like D&D, except you don't start with the fairly complex particular rules frameworks that D&D has. Instead, the only stable rule is the probability estimation rule: a player engages in a maneuver, an action to address the scenario's challenge, and the referee decides how likely the described maneuver is to succeed. This ruling is then enacted with a dice roll, and the consequences adjudicated.

For some D&D referees, it may prove illuminating to study how the game plays without the character classes, hit points, experience rules, and combat rounds — without the constellation that obscures what you are actually doing when playing the game. The conclusion should, I think, be that it is nevertheless the same game, a kind of ultimately stripped primitive D&D.

Coming back from free kriegsspiel to D&D, nothing really changes: an adventurer desires to use a rope to haul themself across a chasm. I wouldn't be surprised with a D&D campaign where the referee flat out decides that this is fairly dangerous

even when performed carefully, so 4-in-6 you don't fall, let's roll to find out what happens. It'd be fairly primitivist to not query the character's Dexterity score, reaching for the foundational underlying conceit of evaluated probability, but not particularly illegitimate.

A referee with slightly more inclination to actually use the mechanical constellations of D&D will surely use a Dexterity check of some sort; roll under DEX score on d20, or get bonus dice to the above d6 check for having a DEX bonus, or whatever. Maybe even a Strength check. If a skill system exists, that will surely play a major part. A campaign with a particularly metaphysical understanding of Level, or one with a Luck stat or Saving Throws, might bring that kind of ineffable heroism into play when faced with mortal peril.

This is why you study the rules texts, to have those tools at hand when crafting pleasing mechanical constellations for your own campaign, or to pull on when an unexpected situation occurs in play.

Rulings, not rules

But still, the rules do not and should not cover all situations. That's been tried, and it doesn't work for a true free maneuver game; player problem-solving will be stifled by the ever-growing stacks of rulebooks, and the mechanical formalisms prove ever more important in comparison to authentic, situational problem-solving. D&D too reliant on the rules becomes a turgid edifice where a spell will always be better

than an idea, simply because the spell is written down in some rulebook, ready-made to have potent interaction with every other rule, while the idea has nothing except the players on its side. If those players are unwilling and unable to defend their ideas against the rulebook, then the rulebook will win every time.

Thus constrained from trying to answer everything ever with rules, the referee is forced to fall back on rulings, as things should be. Making those rulings can be scary, but the free kriegsspiel procedure is actually entirely sufficient to begin with: you will be a great referee simply by being willing to put down a number. How likely is this maneuver to work, counted in percentage units or faces of a die? You surely have some idea. Is it 20% likely? 80%? Something in between?

You see, the process of the game doesn't require you to be correct in some eternal sense, it just requires you to make a call and move on. The unitary moment of dicing resolution reflects a unique event in the fiction of the game; it may carry precedential weight later in the campaign, but it doesn't have to. You have time to consider later and improve as you go.

Some nuts and bolts

What the referee actually does when "simulating" in these games is fairly intricate and unfortunately glossed over by most game texts. I'll just take a couple of practical stabs here to give a sense of the shape of the matter.

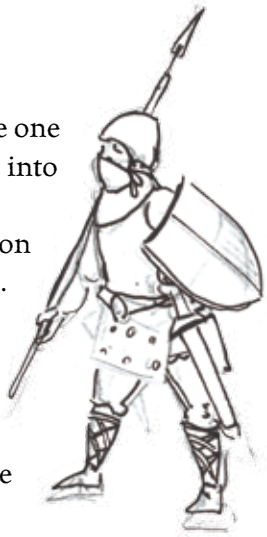
Firstly, learn to perform atomic event resolution as discussed above. A useful little formalization I like to use is to use the rough categories of "likely" and "unlikely" events, with the former having a 50% (3-in-6) chance of occurring and the latter a 15% (1-in-6) chance. Considering most atomic events, whether tasks or random occurrences, you can probably decide whether it's more of a likely or unlikely one. You'd flip the "unlikely" odds to get "most likely" at 5-in-6, of course.

Second, learn to atomize complicated event simulations. You might not have a clue as to how likely a complex event overall is, but if you can break it down into a causal sequence of necessary preconditions that themselves are simpler to evaluate, you can muddle through. I've found making a list of "challenges" a useful approach in this regard: make a list of the difficulties and concerns that come up in a more complex sequence, and then just address them one by one with the group, figuring out how much of a problem that aspect is, what the players can do to address it, and whether dice rolls are needed. This is, in fact, simply what playing the game is: processing the simulation.

For example, when you need to resolve an expedition's desert crossing, figure out if it's possible and safe, it would be possible to do a quick one-roll atomic rough probability likely/unlikely procedure. Or, you might choose to finesse out necessary preconditions such as knowledge of the route, sufficient water storage, and the rare yet devastating possibility

of a storm in the desert, resolving all these and more one by one to paint a more detailed picture of what goes into the event.

Or, you can draw on the more elaborate, hard-won mechanical heritage you have at your fingertips. There are rules constellations for everything out there, and you have your own. D&D is at the end-point of the free kriegsspiel journey, not the beginning. Yet still, I end up doing primitive rulings and atomic probability checks every time we play.



The game operates on common law

The wargaming ethos plays out towards the concept of rules such that "rules" are not actually authoritative over the game directly. They are merely relevant precedent that the referee is obligated to consider when making rulings. If you claim that the campaign is running off the AD&D rules, say, the obligation is on you to actually use those rules case-by-case, insofar as your own campaign process has not produced new precedent, or "house rules" as it is commonly called. But considering the rules text as a compelling precedent is not the same thing as considering them an authority, not even close.

Rulings are produced by referees in a process very similar to how the judicial theory of common law produces law: we have a selection of rules texts (possibly arranged in an

understood order of precedence), we have a history of prior rulings precedent, we have players facile in this corpus of law, and that all enables the referee to produce unbiased rulings based on the fundamental values that they are trying to uphold. Something like this:

Respect the players.
Respect the challenge.
Respect the simulation.
Respect the precedent.

It's actually spooky how good D&D refereeing seems to align with judicial theory, particularly common law, in so many things. You can just apply ideas like say the bright-line test ("a good rule is easy to apply to the facts") or balancing of principles ("sometimes the ref has to account for multiple contradictory values when making the call, finding the best compromise") directly to the game. I'm not even a lawyer, and I still see it.

Rules cruft

Where all this rulings business leaves the actual established, stable, written down rules is something that I like to call **rules cruft** to distinguish from games that have real rules. D&D also has "real rules" in the sense of actually immutable structures of the game, but the rules texts aren't really about this **methodology** of the game. It's only dealt with in passing. Perhaps consider this book as a modest effort at directly discussing the underlying principles of the game.

But rules cruft, that's still a thing that exists and a thing that is useful. The cruft is produced by game designer armchair theorizing, and as a real play byproduct when ideas occurring in play are written down afterwards. It is rulings precedent from the past, suggesting its solutions to the future. The game does have a place for it, for all that you could instead go all streamlined free kriegsspiel and have the referee operate without mechanical rules formalisms altogether.

There's a lot of interesting RPG theory in what benefit mechanical rules are and how they interplay with the game's methodology and principles of play, but for primer purposes, I'll recommend keeping it simple: get a rules text you can stand, use it as a source of ideas, change the things that need changing. With time the concerted practitioner finds their own way and ends up essentially authoring their own rules cruft, an unique personal constellation of tools. With even more time, multiple sets: one for each campaign you play, for each campaign has its own topical focus and matters of concern, with different rules appropriate to highlight and help process the eventualities.

Procedural oversight

Having another person check your decision-making, particularly when it becomes fanciful and difficult to understand, is traditionally difficult for the culture of play. We are not alone in this, sports referees and judges of law also succumb to their egoism and struggle against the concept of

accountability. It would be so nice to be an unlimited god-tyrant. So nice.

I don't want to assume what the reader thinks about the relative advantages of unbridled power, but I myself believe that a powerful executive office that combines wide powers with a presumption of great wisdom in using those powers benefits in the long term from oversight. Feedback, questions, and challenge keep the institution honest.

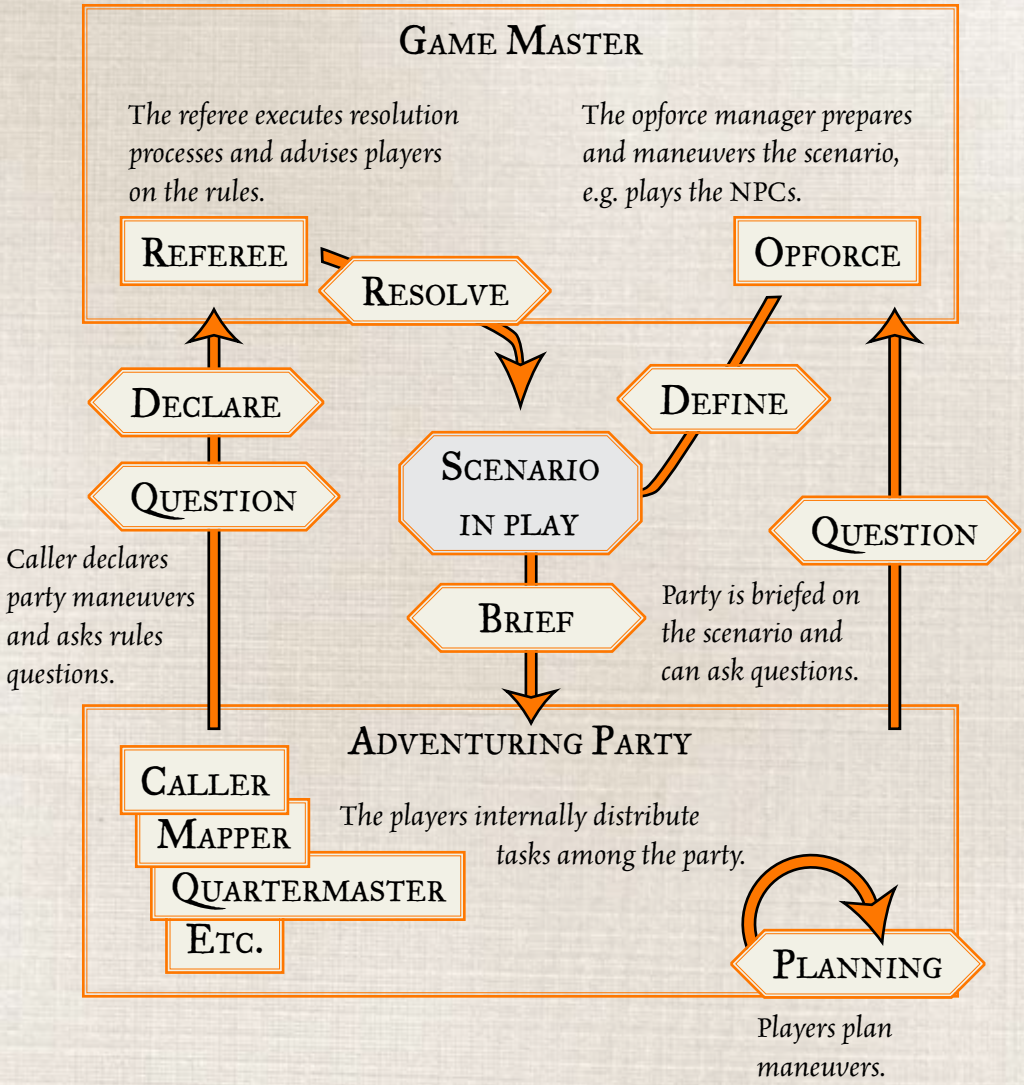
Player oversight of referee action is traditionally hampered not only by player disempowerment (I'll discuss the egalitarian ideal more in the next chapter, it's important) but also by lack of established procedures. I recommend favoring overt mechanical resolution (no secret dice rolls!), open rules (explain the rules if asked!), judicial exegesis (explain your rulings if asked!), and explicitly clearing up time to talk about adjudication issues with the group when anybody, even just yourself, thinks that something is unclear.

I've never truly had players perform a deep audit of my adjudication, but I think that should be an available option should I truly escape off the reservation to such an extent as to make that worthwhile. I imagine that the procedure would involve reviewing my scenario notes and rulings reasoning, with the group instructing me on any perceived problems.

I have myself realized afterwards that I ruled wrongly in a case resulting in the death of a valued player character. I made plans for compensation and started the next session by convening the players in tribunal to review my decision-making: the error, the reasons for the error, and my suggestion

Standard activity model

D&D is structurally traditional wargaming, obscured by the way the Game Master performs dual functions, and all other players play on one side. The arrangement is superficial and easy to break apart for more traditional wargame scenarios.



for how to revise the scenario to revive the wronged character in an amusing, fiction-enriching way.

It is notable in this context that the referee regularly runs oversight procedures on character players: whenever you can get players to take on the execution of any game process, whether mapping the dungeon or calculating prices for equipment purchases, that's always a win for active, accomplishing wargaming. Many tasks can be given to the players, with the referee in a loose oversight position, ready to step in if problems occur.

I see no reason why the same wouldn't hold the other way around: the referee is not above group judgment, and they should always be able to justify their actions, surely. Use your words, any call that you are ashamed to justify is a bad call. Overview of D&D refereeing can generally be performed in after-action review, it doesn't need to stop the game and require players to breach the fog of war as the scenario is ongoing.

Procedural hygiene

The referee's judicial role is necessarily fairly vulnerable to human bias, that's inherent to the concept of an adept facilitator making pseudo-subjective rulings from often secret precepts. Oversight helps, but what the culture of play has chosen as its major technique is not regular audits: rather, we strive to build the referee into a great artist of the

simulative art. This procedural hygiene is, without doubt, a major virtue of the tradition.

Refereeing is not, and can not, be strictured by rules, but it can be improved by hewing to procedures of play that are inclined to encourage fair and honest refereeing. I like to call procedures that are so inclined **hygienic**. The implied opposite unhygienic behaviors are ones that are prone to encourage the referee towards corrupt behaviors.

You can approach hygienic refereeing in many different ways, but here are some basic ideas that I consider particularly noteworthy:

Courtesy: A table that practices courtesy towards each other makes for an emotionally safe environment for the referee. Their decision-making is not biased by emotional blackmail.

Transparency: If you make your random encounter checks in the open, that removes the temptation to cheat in them. If the players can ask you to justify your decisions, that removes the temptation to make biased (and difficult to justify) decisions in the first place.

Oracular filtering: A habit of combining profuse dice rolls into your simulative decision-making helps reduce personal bias in particularly values-sensitive decisions. Would there happen to be a tavern across the street from here? Why not roll for it?

Legal reasoning: Cultivating an instinctual inclination to consider new cases in light of consistency with prior

rulings, with fundamental rights, and with contracted formal rules text, is superior to shying away from such verbalized rationalization.

Use adventure modules: D&D is absolutely advantaged as a wargame in having a rich tradition of meticulously detailed scenario notes you can just pick up and engage. It is easier for the referee to be unbiased if they have very clear, very detailed notes on the scenario to base their decision-making on.

Unhygienic habits

Contrary examples of unhygienic behaviors also abound. I want to emphasize that doing these things is not wrong in a sense of legal breach; they're just behaviors that I think make it more likely for the referee to fail their position. More like a "sin" in the theological sense than a "crime".

Blustering: Macho joking about how the GM is totally trying to kill the adventuring party, or papering over the sadness of a total party kill with self-congratulations, and similar behaviors, can be fun for everybody. But they can also become a perceived reality on either side of the table and are at the root of the "adversarial GMing" doctrine that is ultimately theoretically mistaken, even if in a subtle way.

Outcome planning: A GM who develops scenarios for play by projecting outcomes of maneuvers and planning further on that basis is not necessarily planning to cheat in actual play,

but they are designing their content in a way that encourages making sure the outcomes in play really come about the way they're assuming. This can range from prebalancing hostile encounters to planning scene stack adventures.

Tyranny of fun: A referee who believes that the game should be fun instead of correct is ideologically inclined to abandon their role of fairness in favor of service to real or imagined player satisfaction. It would be better to not worry about how fun the game is, and just focus on making it true; that's going to be fun or not depending on the players, you can't and shouldn't control that.

Intuitive decision-making

The crowning achievement of the hygienic mindset is the confident ability of the referee to "consult the fiction" by perusing the imagined space they maintain to track the game state, and establishing gameable concerns directly from therein. While the basic activity of describing the game world for the players is fairly trivial, there are distinctive mindsets that the referee can take to the task. Particularly, consider the distinction between analytical and intuitive establishment:

Analytical content enters play via the necessity of reasoning: a room exists in the dungeon because it exists in the scenario notes. A rope exists in an adventurer's backpack because it has been marked down on a character sheet. The

people of Italy speak Italian because that's what the sources say. Analytical content is justified by reasoning from precepts.

Intuitive content occurs when a player speaks directly from their internal rendition of the fiction, discussing arbitrary scenario details that cannot be justified analytically. Which way does the dungeon door open? Does the goblin know our language? Somewhat arbitrary questions that are best answered intuitively.

The referee's tasks in managing scenario content and making rulings about it are performed better if the referee is capable of using their intuitive acuity to complement any analytical methods they use. But this presupposes a generally fairly hygienic mental environment, as otherwise, it is distressingly easy for the referee to fall into bias, making calls that lead the game to be more "interesting" or "challenging" or simply conform to their understanding of what dungeon fantasy should be about.

This is arguably the fundamental goal of hygienic practice, to protect and cherish the fragile flower of direct, intuitive knowledge that a player can draw directly from their gestalt understanding of the fictional scenario. The paradox of practicing analytical hygiene to enable the use of the human intuitive faculty!

Creative Virtues

I have touched upon the technical big picture of the game here, but let's try to go deeper. The rules and procedures are ultimately empty and fallible unless they are guided by an understanding of the creative self. Imagine participating in a game of football without trying to win: you play according to all of the rules, and nobody can point out some specific thing that you're doing wrong, for the wrongdoing that makes the game an empty ritual is in the spirit of the exercise. That's the difference that creative virtue makes.

As discussed in the basic section of the book, the creative ethos of wargaming is about bold sportsmanship and scholarly curiosity: we set up scenarios and throw players at them to learn and grow. Creative virtues are the distinct elements of activity orientation that foster these creative goals.

Creative virtues such as these are only developed by time and practice. It is not unusual for a game, or the individual player, to begin without such lofty concerns. Over the long term, though, what keeps us playing after the novelty wears off is the creative substance fostered by virtuous play. I don't necessarily expect my rambling about creative virtues to mean much to all readers, but perhaps I can provide some names for ideas that others have perceived in the game as well.

Authenticity is valuable

The hobby has long struggled with the contrasting desires of on the one hand being a practice of skill, and on the other being a process of content consumption. Is the game at heart an experience you purchase and engage with, or is it a skill you practice and improve in? The gaming industry is largely predicated on the former: most gaming products are not trying to tell you how to do it, so much as they are offering to be the content you consume, in one way or another.

I think that the purpose of playing in the wargaming way is to set up a meaningful scenario and resolve it with the group's own wisdom and judgment. I call it "authenticity" when this happens. The opposite of authentic gaming is experiencing what amounts to a media presentation created in advance. It can be the Game Master who plans the experience, or it can even be a game producer who sells material that then gets arranged by the GM. Either way, the activity is not authentic if it does not involve actual thinking, actual feeling, actual processing, actually "gaming it out" between the scenario and the gamers.

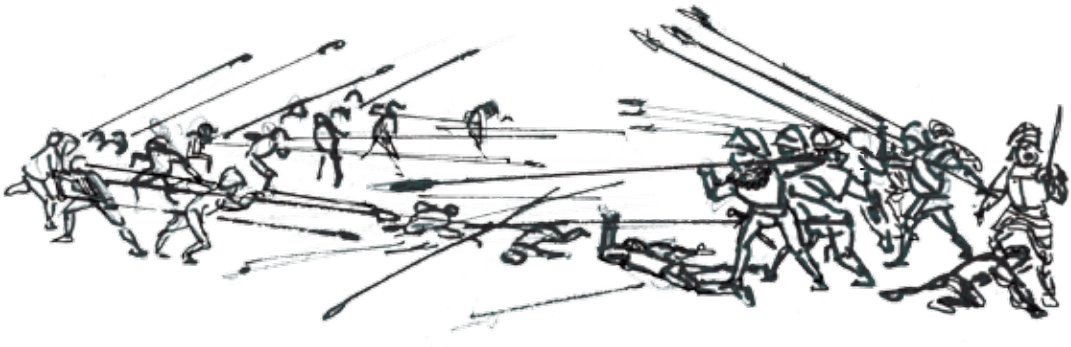
Being aware of authenticity means a sea-change in how you think about the entire edifice of the game because many commonly advised methods and thought patterns are deeply inauthentic. Learning to pay attention to the moment the dice hit the table, whether the players are **experiencing** or **engaging**, helps in the quest for authenticity.

It is anti-authenticity for the referee to be concerned about having the game follow preconceived paths to predetermined

outcomes. This is often called "railroading", but I don't think that it is useful to so label, demonize and set aside something that is a struggle of values. Referee practice can easily be inauthentic long before it starts to resemble traditional railroading. Calling it a name is, sometimes, a way to pretend that you're not doing it.

Players can be more or less authentic as well. It is authentic to believe at face value in the authenticity of the game, engaging it at that same level; it is inauthentic to be ironic and cynical, believing that the game is actually fixed, actually a theatrical play manipulated by the supposedly impartial referee. It is authentic to try your best; it is inauthentic to piss away the game. It is authentic to take responsibility for the fate of your character and adventuring party; it is inauthentic to believe that the game's process will carry you, and your choices do not determine your fate. It is authentic to laugh and cry in response to the game.

D&D as a cultural franchise has become astoundingly inauthentic in the process of being wrapped into a convenient consumer product. Do you choose the content of your play, and resolve it yourself, or are there forces that do these things for you? Does it matter to you?



Egalitarian refereeing

D&D refereeing has traits of a kind of carny huckster sociology in its cultural heritage. There is an underlying idea of the referee being a wonderful wizard who *lets* the players enter his magical world. His ways are mysterious, the rules of the game ever-fleeting and judgments arcane. The other players are encouraged to treat the referee as an authority figure.

Looking at this after the fact, it seems to me that the carny referee model was and is felt useful in part for the showmanship aspects, and in part because it allowed the referee to obscure the prep. The game could be more impressive with less work if the referee was set on a pedestal like this. It also helped establish an **authoritarian organization** of the play group, which is better than no organization at all.

But then, on the other hand, there are also problems here. The huckster dynamics encourage player infantilization, referee cheating, and lack of long-term accountability. And let's not forget the power struggles, the idea of adversiality that may come to be associated with the referee's position.

For these reasons I've concluded that I cannot get the game to where I want it to be while being the mysterious Master of the Game. I must become less, for the other players to grow in turn.

The alternate **egalitarian ideal** is to treat the wargaming campaign as a joint project undertaken by all participants as social equals. There is a referee-GM, who is likely to be the creative primus motor of the project, but they do not desire

other players to enter their magical world *to have an audience*: the wargaming referee desires to engage in **peer discourse**, and that cannot possibly happen as long as you're the wizard and they're the rubes.

To be an egalitarian referee, I think it's important to practice **player empowerment**, which means helping the other players bootstrap themselves as gamers: teach the rules, teach the theory of the practice, foster the creative path and passion of each and every one of your co-players. Insofar as you are the greater, this is indisputably the social responsibility of the referee; if you would let go of the burden, finish the process, and stand as equals.

There must be **transparency** and **accountability**, just like in any established organization. The referee is willing and able to justify their decisions and develop the campaign in the directions desired by their fellow players. Such attitudes help trust grow, and with trust, faith in the game and excitement at the achievements of the campaign. This is a direct antidote to cynicism and encourages authentic engagement with play.

Engaging the creative desires and ideation of the other participants seriously often means doing things "wrong": you are often the more experienced and learned in the art between the two of you, so this is natural. However, I don't think that it's a good idea to take this to mean that the referee should always lead and everybody else follow. The difference between gameplay and lecture as methods of insight is that gameplay is an activity. It is better for learning if you make room in the campaign to try out ideas and approaches. Discuss

them, yes; explain what you think and why you would like to do things in this or that way; but ultimately be willing to try their way with an honest heart, let everybody see how it goes, and perhaps grow in the exchange yourself.

Negotiated judicial exchange

Applying the egalitarian philosophy to the particulars of what the referee does is of course a varied technical matter, but the big picture should also be fairly obvious: we're not discussing shared GMing here, but rather the ways the play group can bring accountability and creative dialogue into the way the GM performs their tasks.

When fellow players disagree on spot rulings made in the middle of the game, the authoritarian advice is that they should quiet down for the sake of fluid progress of the game. There is wisdom to this, and I do encourage you to practice it as a player; I do that myself, I don't start some damn fool "ackchyually, crossbows don't work like that" debate on a hair trigger every chance I get. There's a time and place for something like that.

The egalitarian advice that I'd like to direct to the referee, though, is different: when a player is engaged with the game enough to contest a ruling, don't tell them to suck it up because you're the ref and they're distracting the game. Instead, take a quick break from the action. Ask them to explain their reasoning, why they think that the ruling should be different. Then explain yours. And **let them make the call**, now that

we've gone to the effort of setting up this impromptu tribunal. What is it to you, how the situation at hand gets resolved, as long as the ruling is an informed and authentic one?

I don't want to pretend that biased human interests aren't abroil in these gaming confrontations. An authentically emotionally committed player might wish to see a ruling go their way; it's not that they want to cheat, it's just that they're focused on the moment and their advocacy, not on the big picture. The referee's task priority, however, is to first foster authentic engagement, second foster rule of law, and only thirdly make sure that this current snit of a rulings dispute gets resolved correctly. For this reason, the principle of negotiated judicial exchange:

Always trade a spot ruling for acknowledging a general principle; always trade a rule for engagement.

A couple of examples:

Give spot, get acknowledgment: The party walks into a trap. A player claims that their character was not there, but admits that they did not say this out loud because they weren't familiar with table procedure.

The egalitarian referee easily accepts the claim in good faith, but also discusses procedure and makes sure that the group knows in the future how you're supposed to register it when a character deviates from the marching order. They've given in on a spot ruling while affirming the general principle.

Give rule, get engagement: A player is a big fan of the English longbow (one of the popular medievalist idea clusters), and thinks that the campaign rules do not adequately represent its awesomeness. The dissatisfaction comes up a few different times, too, so it's not just a passing fancy.

The egalitarian referee recognizes that whatever they themself think of bow simulations, and whether they're better informed than the player, does not matter as much as the player's social ownership of the common practice of playing together; for the referee this is but a small matter among the myriad involved in a campaign, while for the player the longbow could be the single greatest charm point of the entire exercise, considering how they bothered to bring it up! By giving in on this small thing the referee wins big in creative capital.

The principle of negotiated judicial exchange discards the idea of the referee as the unerring compass of the campaign's creative direction. In practice you're still it nine times in ten, that's just how the creative work happens, but this baseline reality does not need to be affirmed by nit-pickery over "nuh huh, I clearly said I was standing here instead of there" schoolyard arguments. Give in on the particulars, graciously, in exchange for affirming the core values that you all should be ascribing to. Teach that it pays to speak out your mind, that the referee response to that is engaged and grateful instead of belittling. It'll pay off in the long term in the form of more involved, intelligent, opinionated players.

Taking the XP seriously

This is going to sound mystical to those completely out of the loop, and infeasible to those less so, but I'll just report what I know: experience points in the wargaming way are sacred, inter-subjectively existing, and important in the same way that a golf handicap or high score in an arcade game is. It makes the game better when you realize this and treat them that way because of how it affects your personal creative orientation to the game. Being cynical about it, or even worse, intentionally non-legitimate, diminishes the sportsmanship.

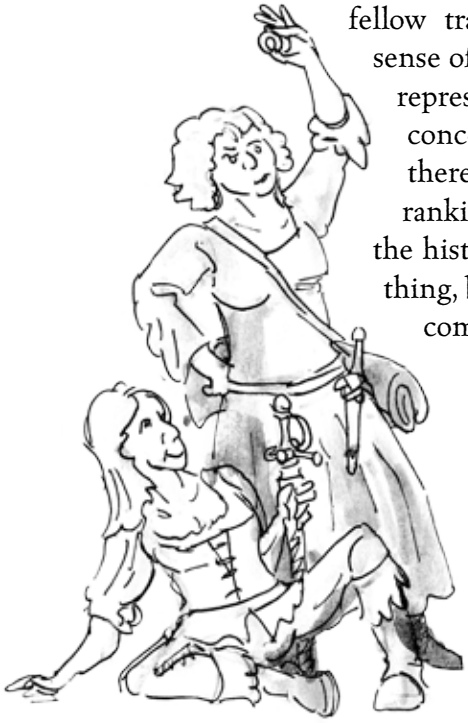
Respecting experience points means acknowledging that they are a goal-based measurement of real play achievement: it is impossible to gain or lose them for simulative reasons or out-of-game-reasons because they track real player performance of the game. The points are precious because wargamey D&D is a difficult game; your highest score is an achievement, and your current score tallies in the form of still-living characters are precious. Anybody who's put in the work to get a character to 2nd level in a legitimate campaign will know what I mean, by the sweat of their own brow.

The inauthentic idea that XP is arbitrary, that the referee "just decides" who gets it and how fast, is poisonous to good game function. Outright starting characters with unearned XP is anathema. I'm not asking anybody to believe in something that is not true, but if it is not true, then my recommendation is to make it so: stop being arbitrary, stop being easy-going, stop plastering over actual performance

with pity points. That's how you make the game feel like something emotionally, by firming up the scoring so it's not theater, and is instead as real as any sport. Stop gaining levels just because time passes.

Because XP is goal-based (with some extremely minor traditional activity exceptions), it's gained in a fairly chunky way that makes direct "how much should you give out per session" measures impossible. The answer is that you should give out zero points per session because nobody should get a single point for just showing up and sitting there. Save a princess or something if you want XP.

It's probably fairly obvious why, when I think like this, I also value consistent historical benchmarking quite a bit; there's value to having the points be comparable from session to session, from campaign to campaign, from GM to GM. And I think the realities of the game do support this ideal to a surprisingly solid degree. Exchanges with fellow travelers seem to confirm a certain sense of quantity in what say a thousand XP represents. There is some grounding for the concept of scoring legitimacy, as much as there is in golf or figure skating, or Chess rankings. It's very convenient to abandon the historical benchmarks and do your own thing, but it is also very possible to stick to a common scaling if you want to.



What is sportsmanship

Sportsmanship is a bit of an old-fashioned concept, and while I see people conjuring in its name a fair bit in the sports world, I rarely see anybody explaining its nature in technical terms. By choosing the wargaming way we choose to partake of this ancient virtue, so it behooves me to give a quick primer on it.

Games are **ritual spaces** where participants enter with an assumption of **good faith**. Sportsmanship is a form of honor that you uphold in your conduct in the ritual space. It is what allows net-positive interaction in a game to occur at all; where otherwise a state of social oppression would reign, a game allows learning and personal growth. But that requires correct behavior from the participants.

Respect other players: Sportsmanship assumes that you are not enemies with your fellow players. To prove otherwise is a breach of honor no less than forsaking hospitality, as you've entered the game space under false pretenses; it is something you do to your enemies, a treachery. You do not play games with your enemies; to play is in fact a gesture of trust and willingness to friendship. Not treating your fellow players as enemies means granting respect: giving space, listening to, and allowing them their own agency.

Cherish the trust: When others are willing to play with you, you hold their hearts in your hands, even if in a small way. Being overbearing in victory or bitter in defeat is a breach of the trust you were given when they agreed to play

with you. Check your behavior, the other players did not sign up to clean up after you emotionally.

You make gains together: Games are not zero-sum activities where one's victory is another's loss. You engage in the game together to learn skills and build social capital. To act otherwise is to become a tool of exploitation or a short-sighted reaver. Feeling better at the expense of others is short-sighted, sociopathic behavior. Dragging your social circles down by asking your friends to grant face for dishonorable behavior is worse still.

The proper social space for gaming allows players to participate in ways that would be risky and disinhibited in ordinary social spaces. You are allowed to lose without loss of face and win without lessening your peers and learn without submission. But that depends on the players upholding the social attitudes called sportsmanship. Learn it, it's a core adult skill in a complex society. Only bullies get by without learning to be playful.

All this might make it seem like sportsmanship issues are regular problems in D&D, but that's not actually the case; it's usually not talked about at all, and the vast majority of the time we just organize ourselves effectively without any issues. Having an experienced social leader in the group helps, as does having a generally adult play group, as one might expect. There are a few mild "what not to do" scenarios that seem to crop up in gaming culture, so mentioning those as sportsmanship problems to look out for might be useful

for perceiving the big picture. Know to not engage in these things yourself, and to interrupt these behavior patterns when you see them in others:

Bitterness in defeat: D&D is played against arbitrary scenarios and luck more than other players. Sometimes players blame their setbacks on the referee, which is frankly not OK when this fellow player has put a lot of work into preparing the game. Trying to make them feel bad for something entirely ordinary (you lose a lot in D&D!) is not sporting. Why would they even want to run the game for you if their reward is you dumping on them for trying their best?

Putting down other players: The play group in D&D is a team, with team dynamics. Sometimes players react to this kind of environment by bullying others; as far as I know, this is basic monkey brain social programming, a shortcut to group unity by defining an in-group at the expense of a scapegoat.

Recognize it (not a trivial task!) and consciously stop it. To do otherwise is to fail the code of sportsmanship. The code does not recognize some kind of pseudo-participant status where you allow a person to sit and break pizza with you, but you still oppress them. Not even if having a scapegoat in the social circle is a veritable delight to the monkey brain. Not even if that player is conveniently earmarked by race, gender, religion, BMI, relative autism, or other social status as the default scapegoat. You need to be better than that to achieve true sportsmanship.

Insisting on being right: A gamer who thinks that being right is more important than being respectful does not understand sportsmanship. D&D involves a lot of debating, so treating every debate as a social threat or simply being obsessively mono focused will end the game in short order. Learn to let it go, learn to be wrong, and modulate the disagreements; compromise is not dishonorable, it is a sign of respect for the other side as a participant even when you disagree with them. The truth will win out in the long term, but only if you retain awareness of the social context and agree to disagree in the short term.

Refusing emotional support: This one's tricky because our social attitudes towards emotional intelligence differ so between various cultures and subcultures. You cannot dictate to other people about emotional engagement, and trying to do so will only cause more anger. You're a better judge than I am of what is constructive sportsmanship in helping your fellow players deal with their feelings of frustration, self-doubt, and anger engendered by engaging in sports.

The general principle is not abandoning people, not blaming them for having emotions (it's a good thing to engage the game seriously!), and keeping lines of communication open. In my experience gamers tend to prefer to save face by closing off all venues of communication, leaving every player to deal with their feelings on their own, and actively pretending to not see anything so as to cut down on shame. If you can do more than that, it would show gains in the game's sportsmanship.

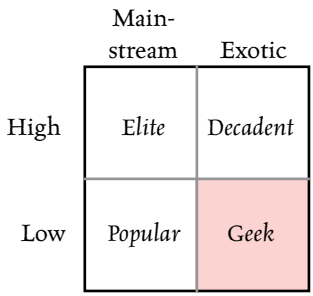
Affirming a false consciousness: Social groups uphold self-evident truths for their members, and a gaming group is no different; by close interaction, you form an echo chamber that reinforces shared ideas. To avoid creating and upholding an insular intellectual environment, a group should strive to encourage critical thinking, intellectual flexibility, and a variety of viewpoints. Failing to do so runs the danger of forming a social clique that loses touch with external reality.

While the ethos of sportsmanship (or wargamership here, I guess) is itself non-political, the virtue of excellence that forms the fundamental cause of the activity demands nothing less than a commitment to reality. A true wargame cannot be performed unless your working group is capable of acting as a clearinghouse of ideas. The gaming table is like a cultural saloon or an academic venue in that regard; not about sermonizing an established truth, but rather about discovering conclusions.

This social code stuff is far from easy, adults regularly fail at life when it comes to upholding these kinds of standards of society. Being aware of the issues and trying your best is good enough in the sense that part of the reason we play games at all is to learn by doing. Sportsmanship is basically a set of social virtues that the activity of sports strives to practice, and the same goes for wargaming.

Scholarship in D&D

Gaming as a subculture is very enmeshed in the historical particulars of the American class society. Gaming is specifically both low-class (ie. new modern age culture, not received education) and exotic (ie. not part of the understood common culture), a major example of the American concept of "geekiness". Geekiness arises to prominence in the early 20th century when popular culture in general emerges, reflecting the already-existing struggle to define the normative culture within high society. Gaming slips entirely naturally into the geek box around the mid-century, alongside comic books and other underwear-sniffing perversity.



It shows how complex the world is, that the above story is entirely parochial to the United States. Different cultures with their different trajectories through the 20th century can only, at best, copy American attitudes in a superficial monkey-see, monkey-do fashion. Here in post-classicist Finland (let's just accept this simplification for the sake of the big picture here, right?) gaming, when it arrived in the early '80s, slotted in as one of those literary hobbies that college students and educated nerds (Finnish vernacular doesn't have a word for "geek") like. Something in between theater and literature, but dynamic young punk stuff that the adults will happily have you take the lead in.

I'd been going at it for a decade myself before I learned on the Internet that American roleplayers generally identify as working class (ie. not good enough) and consider their hobby to be childish and vaguely shameful. "Pretending to be an elf", as a D&D marketing campaign memorably put it in the '00s.

The implication, clear from an external perspective, is that gaming culture traditionally and routinely abashes itself to conform to the concept of geekiness. I'm not saying this about just RPGs in comparison to other "geek shit", but rather for all of it: wake up, you are the western civilization now, for better or worse. The supposed high culture died on the battlefield of Somme, as they say; what remains is but infertile bones you lift above yourself. Time for you to pick up that lantern of enlightenment yourself, if somebody's going to.

So in case you're wondering what all that has to do with the virtue of scholarship in D&D, I think that D&D is exactly the kind of cultural project that has been most affected by the institution of geekiness: succinctly, how can you be ambitious about your scholastics if you believe that the hobby is intellectually trivial?

I've said many critical things about Gary Gygax in this book, just in passing (he's not the topic here), but I'll say this for the man: he consistently saw, believed, and said that gaming was valuable, worthy of being engaged as a serious intellectual exercise by ambitious adults. He sure sold out like a minstrel, but the D&D he personally practiced in the '70s seems to have been a serious adult wargaming pursuit, not a game for children.

The succinct scholastic program

Another big topic in a book full of big topics, but I can at least paint out the bold strokes: this is what I see when I look at D&D, and what the game asks me to study and understand via its activity-oriented wargaming pedagogy:

Theoretical military science: The game's inherently detached from the study of any specific historical context. What remains, then, are the underlying structural patterns of conflict in general.

Premodern society: Ostensibly rooted in a '70s pop understanding of "medieval", what the game is really about is our understanding of premodern humanity in general.

Myth, legend, religion: How magic works? What are the laws of faerie? The game travels through dense layers of cultural lore in complicated ways that beg for mastery.

Adventure literature: Just, a general literature studies tour de force into the way we write and understand literature, and bricolage that material into gaming scenarios.

That is not nothing, and I don't really know what else to call it but a general concern with the virtue of "scholarship". To play good D&D is to study, game it out, and learn.

The Nihilistic Void

Wargamey D&D has a bold feature that is fairly rare in roleplaying games: it involves real victory and defeat. It is real in the same way that sports contests are real: success yields glory, and defeat causes shame and frustration. For the game to be powerful and meaningful, transformative, you have to get into this vibe, start caring about it like that.

The game being exhilarating in success and disappointing in failure is, I think, at the heart of the greatest paradox and peril that the wargaming way faces: if winning really is fun, then why not just keep doing it? What manner of man is the referee who delights in defeat? I think D&D abandoned real challenge historically largely because it takes effort and clarity to maintain the paradoxical ideal of the neutral referee position: a functionary of the game who *of course* would like to see the players succeed and prosper, but who *nevertheless* watches upon the proceedings like a hawk, ruthlessly striking down that which is weak, unfortunate and untrue.

Grace in Defeat

As with anybody who actually plays D&D by its rules, I've been party to many defeats and failures over time. Some have been exciting races to the finishing line, faltering at the last moment; others have been hilarious comedies of error. And some have been utterly unfeeling, meaningless stomps

where promising characters, exciting adventure hooks, and unique campaign positions are annihilated for no good reason whatsoever. The dice just go that way, and here we are, lost beyond human reason. A lot of effort and hopes went into the dungeon, and the only thing that came back was... nothing. Nothing came back.

My pet name for the inhuman nature of loss in D&D is **the nihilistic void**. It's a monster somewhat different in nature from what you encounter in most sports due to the way D&D is not played against human participants, and therefore there is nobody celebrating a victory when our side loses. There's just the void. It's even worse than most solo sports like track and field or golf or such, as the setups and preparations are so arduous and every success of greater scope necessarily builds upon past successes. The best comparisons are hobbies like mountaineering or amateur rocketry, where failure to reach the peak implies wasting all the training and preparation that went into the expedition. You risk the nihilistic void by reaching for the glory of success.

I've been known to characterize the game as a masochistic exercise in failure, engaged by those who like salty liquorice and just generally only feel alive under hardship. I absolutely do encourage people to get a taste, but if that first defeat is not for you, if it just leaves you depressed, then maybe let's play something else, there are plenty of games out there that do not deal in the currency of the void.

But for those who can stand it, here's the positive facet, the glorious truth: every time we lose, the encounter with the

void affirms the authenticity of our play. The sacrament of the void, when we come upon it, is us touching the reality of the game: it *really is* a game of victory and loss, we really can make wrong moves and actually lose in this exercise. It's not theater, the referee is not fudging for us. And this means that when we *do* win, the victory is real as well.

I WILL NOT ABANDON YOU

The insightful RPG theorist, Meguey Baker, once classified the variety of gaming group social contracts into two classes:

Nobody gets hurt is a game where the emotional stakes are low, technical guard rails are effective, and punches are pulled. If you do bruise another player's feelings, it's your fault, and you should say sorry and adjust to it.

I will not abandon you is a game that, in a certain sense, seeks the hurt. The players consensually commit emotionally and play hard, and it is possible that you will get upset. This is all right, we expected it; the group will not make it awkward or disassociate from your hurt, we'll work through it together.

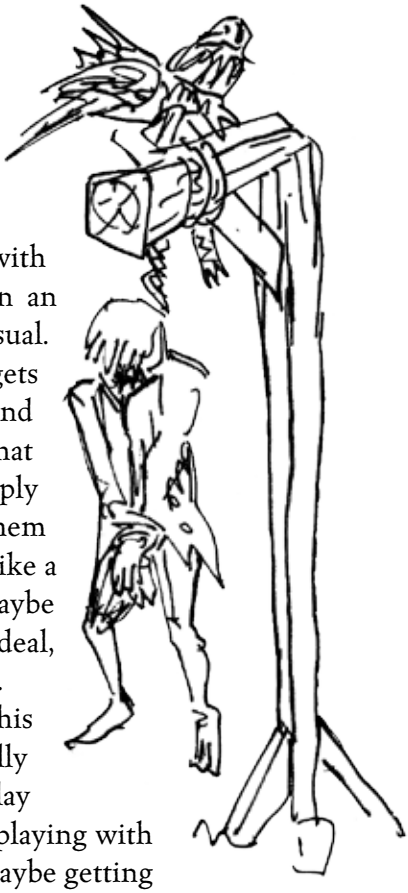
In some places, Meg's analysis has since been taken to mean that there is a good kind of game and a bad kind of game, but that is *of course* not the gist of it. I would say that because the game I have been trying to describe here is of the latter kind: wargaming way, when engaged as a powerful activity with potential for personal growth, may well cause you to

get upset. It is arguably one of the core elements of why we humans contest in sports, to train and grow to withstand failure, pick ourselves up and keep living. We can't have that if nobody gets hurt.

This is not to say that you can't play "nobody gets hurt" in the wargaming way. Of course you can. Just make sure to construe the game's subject matter and processes in a way that emotionally alienates the players from the game events, victories and defeats both. Keep it casual. Maybe get rid of character death: that's a very high-profile particular detail that often features as a sticking point in this regard. Or just keep character relationships jokey and don't mind too much about what happens to them.

But that's basically a choice between being casual and being serious. If you want to get the most out of this game, or any game, you will go further at some point. And if you do, I think that Meg is absolutely right about the correct kind of social contract to be doing it with: the players need to support each other and be there for each other if somebody does get hurt.

What this "not abandoning" looks like varies widely between cultures, so I won't tell you to go and hug that player who lost a loved character; your group might or might not be like that. Mine generally aren't; Finns aren't very touchy-feely. Here it's more like you let the player stew for the rest of the session without drawing attention to their being upset, and then see afterwards if they want to talk about it. Very situational, all of this.



I can, however, tell you what emotional abandonment often looks like: when you're uncomfortable with another player's pain, you belittle it in an effort to force the game back to being casual. Perhaps you think that this is a "nobody gets hurt" game, plus you're a bit of an ass and think that it's the upset player's fault that they're upset, so it's now on you to apply a bit of a metaphorical stick to make them realize where they are and stop crying like a little girl. So you joke about their loss, maybe say something like "it's not such a big deal, man up", or whatever. Belittle their pain.

That sure works in the sense that this player will never, ever commit emotionally to the game again. They'll learn to play casually because they know that when playing with you, the reward for being serious and maybe getting a bit upset by a loss is humiliation.

All this can apply to other things than just losing player characters in D&D, by the way. If you think about situations where players get upset and lose their composure, those are the situations under deliberation here. But of course, if there's one regular aspect of the game that can sneak up on you and frustrate the most jaded souls, it is the nihilistic void of loss.

The mid-tier crisis point

The nihilistic void has a huge effect on the nature of the game; once you face it and see it, the entire game cannot help but start orienting towards it. This is the nature of the game, so nothing to worry about in particular. You learn to appreciate the authenticity of being metaphorically kicked in the groin, or you find some nicer game to play instead.

However, I would also posit that there exists an inherent creative paradox in the nature of wargamey D&D, an insidious emergent interaction that may well explain much about how the game has changed historically. I like to call this emergent feature the **mid-tier crisis point** for reasons that'll become evident.

The issue is that the emotional stakes present in the game are not constant; the further you progress an adventurer, the more effort the player has invested in them. For this reason, we cannot just claim that you'll get inured to the nihilistic void. Maybe you're fine with losing a character you just created; maybe you're fine with losing a character who stumbled into some minor success. But we can never say that you are inured to the void in its entirety because the game doesn't seem to have any practical cap for how far you can fall: the higher you climb, the more you commit emotionally, and the greater the fall.

Meanwhile, the one constant of the game is its loss condition: losing your character. That's the baseline against which success is measured. Thus, the creative paradox: to

succeed further in D&D, you must be willing to play for ever higher stakes, with relatively less success to be had against the ever-increasing risk of loss.

It depends on particulars, but I think that at some point in the campaign there comes a time when the paradoxical demand of ever more risk for ever less success becomes unacceptable. I think I generally see it looming somewhere in the mid-levels, between 10k and 100k XP totals. You've put so much work into the character that risking their life for marginal further gains starts seeming insane to an outside observer, not in the throes of the gambling.

I think that the existence of this emergent feature of the game explains a fair bit about why the game texts are the way they are: they're trying to dodge the nihilistic void and afford you the space to keep playing. Whether this is what one should do is, of course, a highly philosophical question. Goes into the nature of the game.

Here are the various ideas I've seen for how to resolve the mid-tier crisis point:

The game has a level limit: It could be the case that all characters who achieve level 4 or 6 or whatnot are retired; the campaign is about low-level adventuring. Or, there could be a soft limit, with players encouraged to let their best characters out to pasture while continuing to play others. The crisis point is averted by never progressing to press your nose against it.

Stop playing: After playing for a year or two, we've managed to get some characters up to the mid-levels. However, one

wrong move, and now the party died. Isn't that a natural place to end the campaign? I don't know if this is a solution as such, but it is an end.

Success inflation: Making success easy naturally moves the very concept of the mid-tier of play numerically further away; you can play a 6th level character and feel like they're 3rd level by the old reckoning. If it's easy to get to the 6th level, then perhaps we can withstand losing the occasional 6th level character now and again. You can always make more! Of course, this all is hardly a solution; merely rearranging the deck chairs on a sinking ship.

Become theatrical: The historical mainline of D&D development solved the crisis point by shifting from real challenge to pretend challenge. Adding enough encounter balancing, resurrection rules, and dice-fudging will absolutely achieve a game of D&D where it is safe enough to play without having to worry overmuch about losing more characters than the group can emotionally afford.

New mode of play: Name Level domain play never became a fully established thing for D&D, but it did suggest a wargaming solution to the crisis point. If the game were to change at higher levels, switching topics to something where character death is not the very definition of losing, then we could still have a wargame even with characters too valuable to risk routinely, right?

I speak of the crisis point as somebody who sees it from below, but does not truly know what lies beyond. Perhaps somebody else has played hard, legitimately challengeful D&D to the heights where losing your character becomes unacceptable, and can tell us whether there is a game out there. I hope to explore the possibilities myself, as soon as we manage to advance our campaign to the crisis point.

Appendices

That was the main treatise, I hope it got ideas moving for you. Some supplementary materials and back-end stuff from this point on.

More War Stories

During the writing of the book, I came to conclude that practical examples of gameplay, "war stories", may have some merit as inspiration, entertainment, and education. Just, it might be easier to understand how we play through a few concrete stories about it.

I didn't want to choke the book up with excessive storytelling, so many fun stories had to be left out. I'll skim off the best of the bunch here, read on if you want to learn more about some of the high points of our historical fantasy D&D'ing.

The Mantlet Story

A practical illustration of what authenticity is. I think it was the summer of 2011 when we started our long-running "historical fantasy" campaign. It was what I consider my first fully-realized, entirely successful D&D campaign in the wargaming way. I was refereeing, myself.

Some half a dozen sessions into the campaign, we were engaging with the Tomb of the Iron God, an adventure module widely considered a modern classic of the form. The adventure is a low-level dungeon with a more structured upper level and a labyrinthine "crypt level" underneath. Archetypal D&D undead content abounds in the crypts; for many of us, it

was a school of hard knocks in managing skeletons, zombies, and ghouls worst of all.

The adventurers had explored and dealt with most of the first level, and were slowly getting to grips with the crypt when something happened that I'll remember for the rest of my life: Sipi, one of the core players, had an idea.

The party, having retired from the dungeon, returned to the nearby town to bolster their manpower with new hirelings. They had some funding on hand from prior excursions. In addition to allies, the party hired a couple of experienced woodworkers and purchased supplies for building mantlets.

Mantlets, or pavises as a similar conceit, are basically a range of different "big shields" sometimes used in medieval archery and siege doctrines. They differ from shields by being so large that they're not held in hands: depending on the design, the mantlet could have wheels, stable feet, or even a spike to be pushed into the ground to hold the device in place. Needless to say, a mantlet has the potential to be far larger and more robust than a shield intended to be held off-hand during battle.

I knew basically nothing about mantlets when Sipi suggested building some, but Sipi could describe his design to us, so we figured out the parameters of having the adventurers build some. Entirely doable for a low-level adventuring party after they find a few hundred rupees in the dungeon.

The party proceeded to figure out how to use the mantlets. They were fairly slow to move around, but if fighting could be had in tactical defensive, that wouldn't matter. And when

they were fielded against the undead in those crypts, the mantlets were absolutely overwhelming! Skeletons were too weak and stupid to pull the mantlets down against a party crouched behind them in a dungeon corridor, leaving the skellies to reach futilely over and around the barricade, while the adventurers could dispatch the mindless enemy with long spears wielded over the mantlets. Zombies were stronger, but practically speaking too stupid and slow to be able to pull down or break the mantlets in combat pace.

This was the beginning of our local school of "tactical defensive" dungeon combat. It's not some one-liner solution to everything in low-level D&D, but if you can afford to set it up, it solves **a lot**. And what's most exciting is that it is an authentic outcome of the process of play: the rulebook doesn't suggest it; the adventure module does not suggest it; the referee does not suggest it. Sipi and friends thought this up on their own, we played the game to verify whether it would work, and it did! That's the underlying prize of wargaming; authentic success, and authentic learning.

The teleporter disaster

I've had many experiences with the nihilistic void of defeat in D&D, but this one might just take the cake. I'd like to share it to illustrate what clean play unencumbered by dramatic control structures can sometimes look like.

This was in 2014 when I joined Heikki's Moldovan campaign, which had been going on for a while at that point. The infamous event occurred in the first session I was there, so I lacked much perspective on what in the name of Raggi was going on.

The party had been delving into the classic Rahasia adventure module, filtered ruthlessly through wargaming way practices and the particular setting aesthetic of "historical fantasy" that had been all the rage in our circles for a while. But basically, a wacky dungeon adventure with wacky dungeon furniture, including teleportation devices scattered around like discarded boots.

The party had earlier found a teleporter that very conveniently traveled in and out of the dungeon itself. This was useful for us now, as the local baron had closed off the main entrance to the place. Us clever devils were going to use the teleporter connecting to a nearby roadside shrine to sneak in nevertheless. The dungeon denizens had tried to destroy the teleporter to plug the hole in their defenses since the last time the party was there, which the party magic-user noticed, so we knew that everything wasn't quite right with it. But it had seemed to be working before, so hey ho let's go.

Heikki as the referee was of course very considerate about that teleporter malfunction, and had prepared an actual teleporter disasters random table just in case it would come in handy. An old and gloried tradition of the game, those hyper-specialized random tables. Helps the referee maintain

decision-making hygiene, particularly when stakes can get extremely high.

Heikki tells me that the teleporter had a 1/6 chance of malfunctioning per use, and like 5% chance in the mishaps table of getting a "your dead corpse gets splattered all around the destination" result instead of something less stark. My (disposable new) character went in first, actually got a malfunction threatening to merge him with his equipment, but saved successfully and arrived safely at the destination. Kinda an ominous start.

Unfortunately, Peitsa impetuously jumped in next with Taneli's character in tow, and of course, that's when the teleport spat out a lethal malfunction for them, delivering mangled corpses of a Wizard and a Fighter, respectively. To add insult to injury, the rest of the party crossed over safely.

We gathered ourselves, now in the dungeon cellars, and kept going, finding some imprisoned adventurers for the players to take up as their new characters. No biggie.

Afterwards, it took me some time to actually catch up to the scope of these events that I was witnessing as a recent newcomer to the group: we just lost two 3rd level characters to that damn teleporter! Mid-tier characters are crazy rare in this playstyle, that whimsical teleporter just all but decapitated a party that had been adventuring for quite a while, developing their positions.

I am still puzzled and amazed by the laconic, polite manner the events unfolded at the table; I literally didn't understand the consequential weight of what was going on as these

characters kept exploding, the table decorum was that serene. I have no idea of the mental mixture of ironic distance, iron sportsmanship, and shock involved. Players can get quite distraught at the death of Blackleaf, after all. But not there, that night. We just kept going, new characters for the gentlemen, we have a dungeon to delve.

Finally Mid-Tier

In our original historical campaign, back in 2011, this was when I realized that we had arrived: this was no longer a low-tier game of hilariously cancerous death and misery. These adventurers were heroes, and this is what it looks like!

The party was delving into Skull Mountain, a decidedly showy mid-tier dungeon with intense peril. The adventurers had gathered a few score hirelings into a real adventuring company, but the heavy resistance of the dungeon at every turn demanded taking great care about exposing the mundane hirelings to danger; better to have the heroic player characters at spear point for the most part.

The dungeon features a massive stalactite growing out of the ceiling of a vast subterranean cavern. Spiraling down the rock formation are narrow stairs, the only route down into the demesne of the lizardmen. Unknown to the adventurers, the lizardmen, bless their little claws, have a *catapult* set up on an adjoining cliff inside the cavern, pointed at the stalactite. There are even torches set upon the stairs at regular intervals

to enable spotting intruders coming down, and retreating allies had warned the lizardmen to be on the ready here.

The adventurers were making haste going down those treacherous stairs, but you can only move so fast single-file in an unfamiliar stairway without guard rails. When the lizardmen started shooting their catapult, the launch noises were largely swallowed by the immense vastness of the cavern. So unfair!

For the adventurers, there was no warning at all when the large boulder suddenly appeared, noiselessly, from the darkness and *smashed* at the stalactite staircase, in the middle of the rearguard. The boulder broke off a section of the stair and sent men hurling down to their deaths. Or so you'd think.

The dice indicated that the boulder fell on Hans Krüger, last in the rearguard. 4th level now, Hans was ready, though: the way the rules work, the catapult shot deals 3d6 damage, which the heroic adventurer could soak to their hit points; apparently, Hans realized the movement at the last moment and jumped aside, narrowly avoiding instant death and taking a mere glancing blow.

The stalactite shook from the hit as the stairway crumbled, with men falling off to their deaths. (150 feet to the bottom, but who's counting.) Dexterity checks indicated that a 1st level adventurer, Vengeance XI (of a long line of mortality-challenged player characters) was among the unlucky ones, as were two hirelings.

Hans, though, rolled a double-critical on the DEX check here, deftly catching himself and, realizing the situation,

jumping for the next man in line, grabbing for the falling armsman and securing both himself and the hireling away from the danger zone.

Looking at the missing 20 feet or so of stairs, with Hans and the lone hireling on the upper side, the party decided to begin the arduous yet hasty process of retreating over the gap. The alternative seemed grim, particularly as the adventurers couldn't know that the lizardmen only had one of these large boulders for their catapult.

Just a tidbit of play, but for me that game-mechanical interaction between Hans's burgeoning hit point pool and the man-crushing mechanical weight of the boulder was significant. This was exactly what would happen in a movie, the support cast plunging to their dooms while the adventuring hero somehow survives a terrible peril. So good job D&D, modeling seems to be on point here.

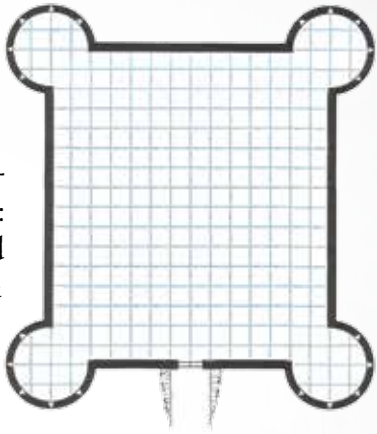
The many Caldwells

A fun little story about campaign prep:

B9, Castle Caldwell and Beyond, is an obscure TSR adventure module, or rather a module it is claimed to be; in fact, it's an anthology of five small scenarios of no particular significance. My understanding is that Caldwell is not of much interest internationally, but here in Finland, it enjoys something of a cachet for being one of the few modules ever officially translated and sold in the Finnish market. Many of

our D&D kids (in which number I never belonged myself) played this back in the '90s.

So Caldwell (the titular adventure, first in the anthology) is well known in the Finnish scene as the iconic basic D&D dungeon. In 2014 the local hobbyists had a little dungeon-design contest with a related premise: the castle keep of Caldwell (populated by bums and rats in the main; it's not a showy adventure) enjoys a distinctive shape as a small, compact adventure location. If you remove the internals and leave just the walls, it's ready to be repurposed into a new dungeon. Your seen-all veteran players recognize the distinctive keep from the outside, but hey, the internals are now new!



An empty Caldwell map grid is a convenient player aid when tackling a Caldwell.

I didn't have the time to participate in the contest myself, but I thought that the results were great, so afterwards I took these new Caldwells alongside the original and threw them all into our then-ongoing campaign. We were playing a later leg of the historical fantasy campaign, now set in 13th century Sweden, so the premise was that a famous castle engineer (an English freemason by the name of Caldwell, obviously) had a few generations back designed a new keep for the taming and colonization of Vestmanland, with the result that over a half dozen manor keeps around the region had been constructed

from the same plans. The king and the engineer were cursed by a witch, of course, which is why all except I think one of the keeps had since then fallen afoul of various misfortunes and become adventure locations. The contest Caldwells have all kinds of fun contexts, like being sunk into a swamp or becoming haunted or falling sideways into a rift in the Earth, so clearly there's something cursed about being a Caldwell keep.

Red marks the spot of each Caldwell.

What tied the chain-Caldwell adventure together was when the party discovered the unfortunate architect's old map, designating the building sites of the keeps. Handy for a party of adventurers interested in finding cursed (read: dungeon) sites. With the map in hand, nothing prevented the adventurers from researching the particular cursed histories of each location and associated noble families at their convenience.

This Caldwell scheme worked really well as an extended sandbox campaign adventure, I thought; notably the conceit does not suffer from an excess of plot, like large adventure modules often do. I also like it as an example of how you can use simple structural patterns with found content to make a dense setting to adventure in.

Short history of D&D

I know that this is old hat to many readers, but not everybody's a grognard who's actually lived through half or more of this history, so, just, I'll try for a really quick summary of the big movements in D&D's cultural history. This is necessary knowledge for further self-study, as the history of the game is quite convoluted: Dungeons & Dragons has undergone many changes over time, and many different games have been published under that one single name.

Born under the name

The earliest type of D&D was also the first tabletop roleplaying game. Wargamers Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson developed a pretty innovative game in the early '70s out of the intellectual flotsam and jetsam of the era. The game was a refereed wargame about small unit exploration and commando warfare in fantastic underground mazes. This style of D&D is nowadays often called **old school**.

Old school D&D became a veritable hit among the gaming audiences of the time, expanding the reach of the wargaming hobby so far as to break off as an independent hobby culture of roleplaying in a few short years. The potential in the new medium of tabletop

roleplaying was immense, and from early on people pushed forward into new games that explored entirely different vistas of gaming. Old school D&D remained popular, of course, having been the first.

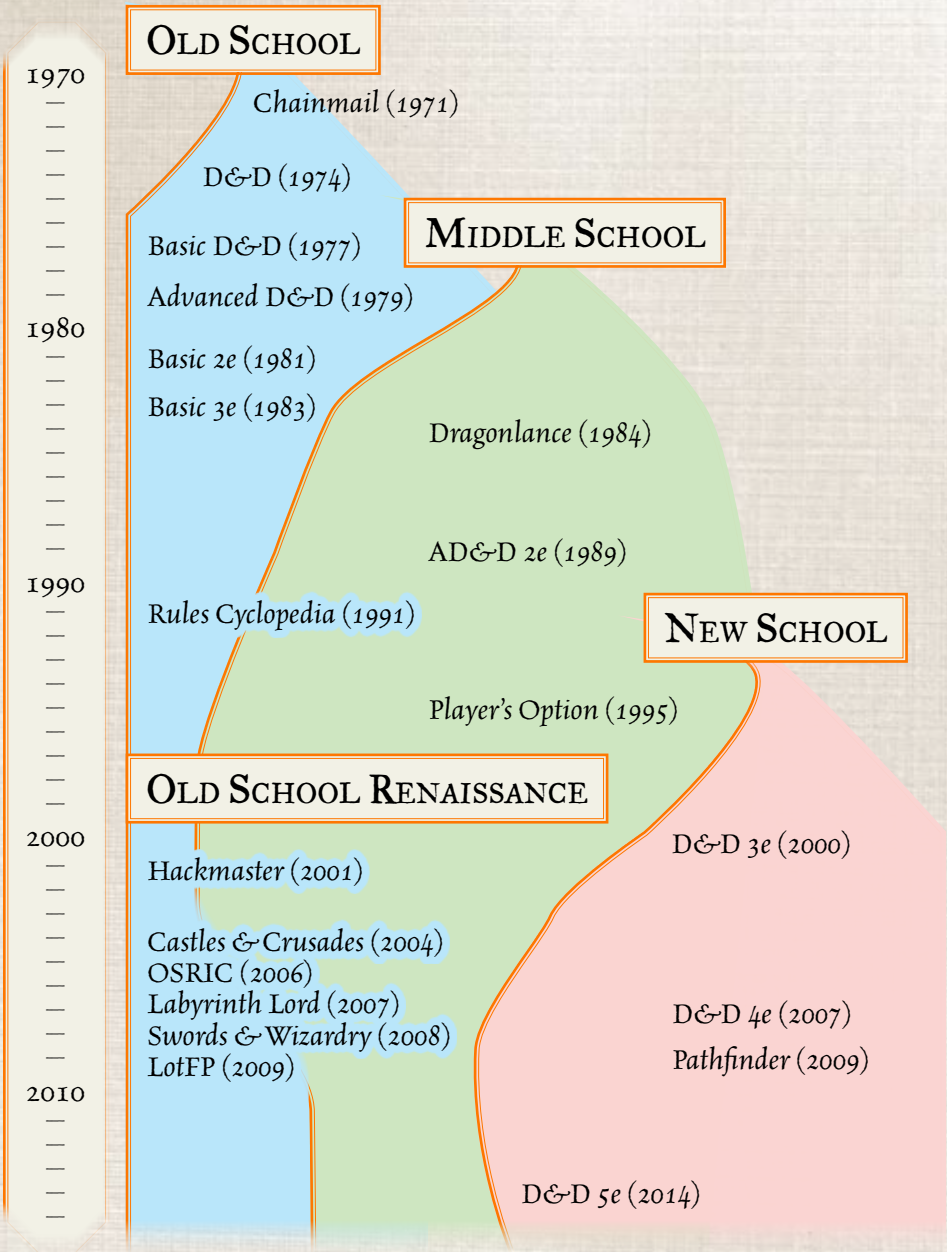
Important game texts of the old school era include the foundational '74 edition of D&D, as well as the Basic D&D line of products that the publisher, TSR, put out to serve the market. Third parties such as Judges Guild contributed important developments to the game. Advanced Dungeons & Dragons was a major publication in the late '70s that for many serves as the capstone of the old school era. Old school D&D game texts continued being published, particularly under the Basic D&D label, throughout the '80s and into the early '90s, but it could hardly be called the mainstream of D&D by then.

Then the game changed

While being recognizably the dominant strain of D&D over the '70s, in hindsight old school D&D was remaindered into obscurity relatively quickly in the early '80s, as a new style of D&D — arguably a new game altogether — came into vogue with new cadres of hobbyists and publishers. The roleplaying hobby had been quick to attract gamers interested in taking the game in a more narrative direction, and as these new hobbyists came to charge over the decade, D&D itself would change to accommodate new ideas.

Three schools of D&D

A summary of the three-schools historiography of D&D, and how some landmark game texts fall into the different eras of the game.



This new style of D&D discarded the wargame framing of the old game and instead emphasized literarily stylized high fantasy plots. The neutral referee figure was replaced by a game master responsible for conducting a fantastic experience of adventure. The change at the time in how D&D was understood was relatively organic, helped along by the obvious freedom for any given group to keep playing in whatever style they liked. Nevertheless, we've found it useful since then to label the distinct new '80s style of D&D. I like calling it **middle school** because like old school, it was not the end of D&D's story.

The middle school era of D&D lasted until the game's publisher, TSR Inc., went into bankruptcy in the late '90s. During this time frame, D&D became more clearly a walled-garden publishing operation, with TSR putting out immense amounts of gaming material. The most important middle school era game texts are Advanced D&D material, with the 2nd edition core books being considered an exemplary pinnacle. The highly literary campaign setting works like Planescape and Ravenloft also very much encapsulate the creative values of middle school D&D. The popular early '80s Dragonlance campaign is often considered the watershed moment that heralded the beginning of the middle school.

TSR goes bankrupt, WotC takes over

D&D was reinvented again around the millennium, with the publication of the "3rd edition" (a marketing term referring to the prominent AD&D product line) of the game, this time by a new publisher and a new generation of game designers. This time the change was more driven by corporate concerns than hobbyist inclinations; the game needed to become easier to sell so as to appeal to a new generation of gamers grown on minis, CCGs, and video games.

Decisive new features that were introduced into the game at this time were a focus on carefully balanced set piece combat encounters and character optimization. The rules complexity skyrocketed to unprecedented heights. This new style of the game is often called, you guessed it, **new school**, although for most hobbyists it is of course simply Dungeons & Dragons, being the currently marketed version of the game.

The central game texts of new school D&D are the respective core rulebooks of the various game lines, the "editions" of the game. The 3e, 4e, and 5e each involve dozens and hundreds of books published by both the current publisher, Wizards of the Coast, and numerous independent publishers. Each edition presents a complex stand-alone rules chassis for what amounts to a tactical miniatures skirmish combat game.

Three eras, three games

This is absolutely a debatable point, but for the sake of putting in place *some* interpretation, I'm just going to suggest that the three "schools" of D&D are, when considered in hindsight, essentially different games. A trademark does not make the game; the creative priorities and technical processes do. It is not a case of a single game developing towards ever-more perfection, so much as it is a tree sprouting new branches into new directions.

While all of these eras of D&D have a wide latitude in the particulars of how you play, they also have their own biases: the old school game is uniquely suited to the wargaming way we've been charting in this book; the middle school game is all about big storylines and heroic protagonist player characters; the new school game offers an intricate skirmish combat game.

Discussing these other possibilities of D&D goes beyond our remit of the moment, but even just being aware of them helps one in relating to various game texts and the actual games they are striving to implement. It's not necessarily that the game is bad, it may just be trying to use a totally different tool-set, for entirely different purposes.

At this writing the old school game is doing very well as a tradition of gaming; the OLD SCHOOL RENAISSANCE movement has essentially jailbroken the game, detaching it from the commercial concerns of the trademark holder. You will suffer no dearth of public discourse, much of it very much in the wargaming spirit.

Glossary

I hope that Muster finds readers among hobby veterans of various training pedigrees as well as new gamers eager to expand their horizons. It's practically a given that my particular technical language is going to sound strange to gamers who've carved a different route through the culture. In consideration of that, I'll put down a bit of explanation on some of the more arcane concepts. If you're lucky, that weird turn of phrase that puzzles you could be explained here!

Adversial GMing is a heterodox old school D&D doctrine that construes of the game as being a wargame conducted between opposed sides, with the adventuring party on one side and the GM on the other. The idea is not very popular, and is more viewed to be a creative difficulty when a player holding adversial views tries to play with others.

Theoretically speaking adversiality is an ideal inachievable in reality of a game reliant on a referee. But then roleplaying culture is full of impossible ideas, adversiality is not nearly the most fantastic.

The wargaming way discussed in this book denies the doctrine of adversiality; the group sets up a scenario together and conducts it firmly, with sportsmanship, for glory and learning. The GM is not trying to "win".

Analytical reasoning is one of two major types of knowledge attainable by a GM/referee in their decision-making, with "Intuitive decision-making" being the other one. Analytical information originates in external records and shared memory of the play group, and may thus be justified, well, analytically.

Asking questions is one of the two main tasks of the player in D&D. (For the other, see "Maneuver".) Being able to interrogate the GM for further detail on the scenario and game state is both a necessity of the verbal medium of the game, as well as its unique strength.

Learning how to be a good questioner is by far the majority of the skill required to play D&D well. Your task is nothing less than to fish out the necessary information that makes it plain as to which maneuver leads to victory.

Advanced D&D is a late '70s TSR D&D product line intended to complement their "Basic" D&D line with a deeper and wider vision of the game; basically, extending the game into an open-world sandbox. AD&D is generally more complicated, more incoherent, and more uneven among the two TSR product lines, so much so that the Basic line would actually get its own extended rules treatment in the '80s.

I try to not call the extended sandbox form of D&D (see "Extended D&D") "Advanced", even if it is a natural lexicon to use; AD&D is fairly well-known in the scene and used a lot in non-extended play, so using the same term to mean open-

world sandbox campaigning and this specific flavor of D&D rules mechanics feels like a recipe for confusion.

Adept facility is my jargon for what Gary Gygax calls being the "master of the game" in his evergreen MASTER OF THE GAME... in fact, see "Master of the game" for more on that.

Point is, roleplaying games often involve some significant skill elements in simply performing the game. Not just playing well within the constraints of it, but in actually setting it up and facilitating it. Wargaming D&D is one of those games that gets better the more skilled the GM: more understanding of the sciences human and natural, jurisprudence, the actual art of RPG design, and so on. While we can study method and apply method, my current understanding is that we cannot actually reduce the adept facility out of the game: ultimately refereed wargaming needs a skilled referee, not just one who knows and follows the rules.

Anti-Dramaticism, see "Drama".

Authenticity has wormed its way into my lexicon as a bit of a buzzword as my gaming matures, and it seems to particularly pop up when I discuss the wargaming way. There's an entire subchapter on the concept, page 174.

Balancing test is common law legal jargon for a situation where the judge has to make a ruling on a case that involves the opposition of two or more legitimate interests: the ruling has to be found in a compromise of interests because it is impossible to satisfy all relevant principles perfectly.

A D&D referee, being a type of judge, is often faced with having to perform balancing tests as well; it is common for social obligations, pedagogical interest, creative preferences, fairness, and more to come to logger-heads. The defining feature of a balancing act is that I cannot give a *qualitative* precedence for these various values in a ruling situation: I can only advise you to *quantify* the various stakes and seek a ruling that preserves great value while sacrificing minor value.

See "Bright-line test", a complementary concept in how to formulate jurisprudence.

Basic D&D is either of:

(I) a TSR D&D product line from ye olden times, running from 1977 to the TSR bankruptcy in the late '90s. While the line extended over time, its primary focus was on providing a simple starter platform for playing the basic type of D&D, as in:

(II) my preferred name for the campaign structure where all scenarios are dungeons, there is no significant maneuver outside the dungeons, and the GM prepares only one dungeon at a time. Contrast with "Extended D&D".

Bright-line test is a succinct piece of legal jargon that I've adopted for my own use when discussing the technical aspects of refereeing (a task unsurprisingly quite similar to real-world judicial work). The term refers to the quality of a given test (application of a rule) being clear and binary to apply, like a brightly drawn line where you can always say whether a given case lies on this or that side of the line.

Good rules design for wargaming purposes pays attention to the brightness of the lines because the rules will need to be applied by a referee who will find the task easier if the rules are simple and clear. Much of the D&D rules design is about abstracting complicated ideas into simple bright-line tests, like "combat casualty at 0 HP" or "wizard gets this many spells per day".

Also, see "Balancing test" for a kinda complementary concept.

Creative Agenda is a core concept of the RPG theory edifice called the "Big Model", by my spirit animal Ron Edwards. It's technical jargon for the creative purpose to which the gaming activity is being harnessed. The creative substance that the activities of gaming are attempting to achieve.

The wargaming way expressed in this book is a fairly clear-cut example of what Ron's theory calls a Gamist creative agenda; we're trying to set up intellectually and emotionally stimulating challenges and then knock them down, or fail gloriously in the attempt. Understanding your play on this level is, I believe, fairly useful; it's a step beyond "we're trying to have fun" in terms of specificity and purposefulness.

Creative interest, creative stakes, etc., see "Creative Agenda" above.

Cruft, see "Rules cruft".

Diegesis is traditional lit crit jargon for the told story; diegetic truths are things that are true inside the fiction, such as how Superman is from Krypton. In roleplaying games the diegesis is the narrated, established, and imagined in-game reality.

Nordic RPG theory tradition (surprisingly vivacious, that!) likes the word, and it does slip into my own discourse regularly. The Forgite "fiction" or "shared imagined space" usually means the same thing.

Drama is this short-hand gesticulation towards structured storytelling, as in Aristotelian *Poetics*. The concept of narrative structure is important for RPG theory in general and the wargaming way in particular because of how naturally humans parse their reality in narrative terms. Various roleplaying games then either play along or try to struggle against this tendency of finding thematic meaning in random ink blots.

Wargaming in general is powerfully anti-dramatic due to the core conceit of the activity being unbiased modeling of a posited reality, "to see how things play out". Simulating a scenario does not possess inherent literary theme, which leaves a human observing a simulation kinda scrambling for meaning. It is easy to get biased in the act of simulation by a stray narrative arc; it pops up by accident, but once you see it, the mind desires to fill in the pattern of meaning. The anti-dramatic, nihilistic nature of simulative modeling forces you to confront your own cognitive biases in this regard.

Dungeon fantasy is a specific subgenre of fantasy literature, namely the one inspired by Dungeons & Dragons. Tabletop

gaming and video games obviously wallow in dungeon fantasy, but there's also plenty of more or less proper literature that concerns itself with adventuring parties going into dungeons. Men of culture can easily tell you that the genre seems to be particularly popular in Japan for whatever reason, but it's not difficult to find entirely western examples, either.

For the purposes of the wargaming way, it's actually kinda important to be aware of literary interest and human dramatic inclinations; otherwise, it's only too easy to drift from playing to discover outcomes into playing to fill in the genre patterns. Not surprisingly, the genre of literature that a D&D campaign starts doing when it gets trapped by a dramatic pattern is most often dungeon fantasy. What else?

Dungeon Master, see "Referee".

Dynamic balance is my personal solution to the theoretical issue of game balance in D&D: how do you match the correlation of forces on the adventurer side and the dungeon side such that the resulting scenario is exciting and not a done deal already at the start? See page 134 for a full discussion.

Egalitarianism in roleplaying is the philosophy of engaging your gaming group on socially and creatively even terms, being open to the players being creative stakeholders in the enterprise rather than mere audience or supplicants of the GM's project. The opposite concept would be authoritarianism, see particularly "Master of the Game".

For a fuller treatment, see page 176.

Extended D&D is a term I'm trying out to indicate the kind of campaign structure where players get to negotiate with the GM over the strategic course of the game — pick out which adventures to tackle, in other words. The concept is old and naturally implied by D&D, but it doesn't really have a good established name. "Advanced D&D" has sometimes implied this, and more recently "sandbox campaign" has been popular.

The concept contrasts with "Basic D&D", the original form of the game where play begins at the dungeon entrance and ends when the party exits the dungeon.

False consciousness is an externally imposed worldview that falls apart under careful examination. It's more of a political philosophy concept, but I've found that it's useful specifically for discussing wargaming due to the way the wargame's creative interests require skeptical scrutiny of assumptions. Basically, false consciousnesses over various matters are both obstacles to authentic play and threatened by such.

In the case of D&D specifically, we have plenty of opportunities to puncture the balloons of adopted truth. Does it make sense for our four adventurers to venture alone into a dungeon inhabited by savage monsters? Is it moral for us to assault these underworld homes with deadly intent? Why do these orcs have such large treasure piles? Have fun!

Fiat is RPG theory jargon for a free player choice. Usually, we're concerned with the GM "ruling by fiat". See "Method" for contrast.

Fictional positioning is Forgite RPG theory jargon for the specific type of game state that roleplaying games uniquely can involve: instead of the game position being laid down on a game board or computer memory, it exists within the minds and communication of the play group.

For our purposes here the important kind of positioning is character position: a lot of the actual gameplay in D&D is about establishing where, in physical and other terms, a character currently is. Much of your maneuver envelope from moment to moment is defined by where you are.

Specifically, *tactical positioning* is where you are in the marching order, whether you're inside or outside the room, whether you're right at the doorway or a few feet to the side, and so on. Should be obvious how foundational it is to become adept in handling tactical positioning, communicating, and processing it fluidly.

And, equally importantly, *strategic positioning* is whether you've managed to establish an acquaintance with the Duke, or have a house in town, or got bestowed with a sacrament by a god. In an extended campaign, the transition from having no strategic position to having a complicated and specific position is most of the game, equally as important as your XP score.

Filibuster (or "freebooter", its English equivalent) is a charming bit of American military jargon from the 19th century, indicating privately conducted warfare; privateers, corporate security forces, and volunteer battalions can all be filibusters in this sense.

D&D is a fantasy wargame about the conduct of filibustering expeditions, whence the relevance here. A referee preparing to rule on the various socio-economic and military issues involved in such expeditions might find having a name for the practice handy.

The Forge is a RPG hobby cadre I ran with in the 'oos. Known for advocacy of commercially independent culture, a brand of structuralist RPG theory, and intense game design workshopping. The Forge looms large in my own hobby life, so I'm just going to assume that anybody interested in ancient hobby history will easily find out more. I don't think it's required reading to get on with the wargaming way, but there it is, if you were wondering what the "Forgite" things that I sometimes mention are about.

Game Balance is a lie. Or rather, it is a game design concept that applies poorly to the wargaming way, so you get to spend a lot of time addressing thought patterns surrounding this rather dominant concept of gaming culture.

The inherent paradox of game balance for wargaming is that if you're playing to find out, then what can you find out in a game that has been balanced to provide an even-handed struggle? If the game designer values making the game even and exciting more than they value simulative modeling, there is nothing to be found out except the designer's footprints upon the soil of the game.

See "Dynamic balance" for what I believe to be the proper approach to the creative concerns that game balance tries to address.

Game Master, see "Referee".

Gaming out a scenario in wargaming is the process of resolving the outcome of a dynamic model. The subject matter of D&D is ultimately limited to matters that can be gamed out, as that is what the game is; what cannot be gamed, must be merely stated. See "Simulative modeling".

Grognard is traditional wargaming terminology for veteran hobbyists. D&D arising from wargaming culture, the concept has some currency there as well.

The word itself is French for "grumbler" and originally refers to Emperor Napoleon's old guard regiments. The Napoleonic wars being such an ever-green wargaming subject matter, the jocular comparison writes itself.

Hygiene, see "Procedural hygiene".

Intuitive decision-making is my jargon for when the GM/referee directly consults their personal imagined game fiction to introduce a scenario fact or make a ruling. The concept contrasts with decisions based on "Analytical reasoning" from scenario notes or overtly established fiction.

Intuitive decision-making is a crowning challenge of skilled refereeing, I discuss it in more depth on page 171.

Legitimacy, or hewing to accepted standards, is naturally a big thing for the wargaming way; a game rule, particular scenario, a referee ruling is "legit" if it accords with the creative values and established practice of the game. Giving out 1 XP for

recovering a Gold Piece from the dungeon is legit; arbitrarily giving out 1k XP for "good roleplaying" is illegitimate.

I don't touch upon legitimacy a lot in MUSTER because talking about it all the time makes me sound really judgemental, and we're really not about that here. The particular history of D&D does mean, though, that anybody wishing to maintain any sort of standards is confronted with judging legitimacy all the time; in your own actions if nothing else. So a form of the RPG hobby where you actually count scores and strive for "real challenge" and all that is also one where you have to affirm or deny legitimacy.

The issue, if not the term, has long historical roots for D&D; a traditional antipode of legitimate D&D for the longest time was "munchkining" or "Monty Haul" play; terms that used to imply illegitimate, collusive play practices that robbed the game of its challenge.

In practice, I mostly end up using the concept of legitimacy in establishing the dividing line between wargaming D&D and other styles of the game. Like for example, I don't consider DRAGONLANCE to be legitimate on account of the campaign's dramatization-inclined nature, with outright referee advice that runs counter to wargaming principles; DRAGONLANCE is a classic masterpiece of middle school D&D, but running it legit would be nigh impossible.

I hope it's clear how all of this is about establishing the standards of the sport, not about disrespecting other games. Line dancing is not legitimate football, but that's not a

condemnation of line dancing so much as it is defining the identity of football.

Literary interest is jargon for the cultural values associated with compelling setting work and narrative presentations that occur in roleplaying. See "Drama" for the complementary concept of story arcs; literary interest is sort of a wider and more encompassing term that indicates not only story structure but also epic and lyrical values involved in e.g. the GM's work in presentation.

In the wargaming way, literary interest can be tricky, as a deft turn of phrase easily inspires and informs the process of play, but it is nevertheless not the foundational purpose. This can be difficult to accept for a gamer used to treating roleplaying strictly as a storytelling art. In the wargaming way your literary material ultimately only matters for inspiration; like the Olympic Games starting ceremonies, the literary form is not the game itself.

Location-based scenario is the default way old school D&D scenarios are prepared: the GM details the adventure location, such as a dungeon, writing out its geography, architecture, denizens, treasures, and other matters of interest. It is the natural and straightforward way to prepare a wargame to be played.

RPG culture has largely moved to use a different strategy in preparing scenarios, even in games that superficially resemble old school D&D, so knowing about the difference might be useful; see "Scene stack" for comparison.

Maneuver is one of the two primary tasks of the player in D&D. (For the other, see "Asking questions".) Whenever a player makes a move in the game, it's a "maneuver". The referee's main job is to "process maneuvers" by ruling on how to resolve the maneuver's consequences to the game state and then executing the ruling.

The ideal of the wargame is ultimately to hunt for that golden moment when a player makes a really clever maneuver. Showcases something novel. That's what the game's structure ultimately looks for: that golden maneuver.

Master of the Game is the name of an RPG guidebook authored by one Gary Gygax in the late '80s. It's sort of a companion volume to his earlier book Roleplaying-Mastery. Gygax by this time was writing a very middle-of-the-road, tradition-hewing generalist RPG text, so the ideas outlined in the books have dated badly (unless you're a traditionalist, I guess). I do like the ethos of craft pride that Gygax espouses, for all that it's easy to ridicule the haughty tone, with master this and grandmaster that.

I find myself using the actual term to poke fun at authoritarian philosophies of gamemastering. Gygax was such a Master of the Game himself, you know?

Compare and contrast with "Egalitarianism" and "Adept facility", if you will.

Mechanical aesthetics is jargon for the pleasure of engaging a well-considered and beautiful system of game mechanics. Often the reason for preferring one dicing scheme

over another mainly comes down to handling pleasure, which in turn depends on what you're used to as well as a myriad of other cultural reasons. I just tend to call that "aesthetics" of the game mechanics, so as to distinguish from substantial issues that might also come into play when designing rules mechanics.

Method is a particular manner of accomplishing a purpose. In the RPG context, we usually use the term in juxtaposition to the concepts of "Rule" and arbitrary "Fiat". Methods are formalized (i.e. pre-existing, verbalized and conscious) like rules, but they are not binding; you use a method by choice, as an alternative to raw fiat.

Wargaming D&D is a peculiar game in that most of its fundamental structure is methodological rather than being reified in the rules. "Neutral referee" is a method, not a rule. Arguably this book is mostly about the methodology underlying the explicit rules given by a game text.

Middle school D&D is one of the historical eras of Dungeons & Dragons; the concept is discussed in detail on page 213. The cultural features of middle school D&D (orientation towards story and character play, with associated technical changes) existed in D&D play culture from early on, but as a publishing era, the middle school begins with Dragonlance in 1984 and lasts until the bankruptcy of TSR in 1997.

Modeling, see "Simulative modeling".

Modern D&D, see "New school".

New school D&D, often simply called modern D&D, is one of the historical eras of Dungeons & Dragons; the concept is discussed in detail on page 213, but the defining cultural features are system mastery, character build focus, and skirmish combat emphasis. The era begins properly with the publication of the D&D 3e in the year 2000. Presumably, it's still going — historiography can't really tell when an era ends before some time has passed.

Nihilism in philosophy is a worldview that denies the possibility of meaning or purpose. Usually, we're discussing nihilism in a specific context, you're nihilist about something or other in the specific. Here in RPG land, I find myself conjuring the name in particular opposition to drama, see "Drama". Also, page 191 for discussion of the nihilistic void a sportsman confronts at the moment of loss.

Old school D&D is the name of a historical era of Dungeons & Dragons; the concept is discussed in detail on page 213. For historiographical purposes, I generally hold the old school era of the game to have started at birth and lasted until 1984, when Dragonlance became the first major commercial success of middle school D&D.

Old School Renaissance (OSR) is the name of a late '00s creative movement that posits to renew the old school playstyle as an alternative to the commercially dominant modern D&D. It's less of a school of thought and more of a

creative community unified by the cultural history of D&D. Recently the OSR scene has seen itself splintering for various political and cultural reasons as the movement matures.

The OSR is not a specific doctrinal playstyle, so you can't say that I'm teaching "how to play OSR" in this book, but I do nevertheless believe that the wargaming way is fairly common in OSR circles.

Opforce or "opposing force" is wargaming (and military) jargon for one of the sides (factions) in the wargaming scenario. It's not used in symmetrically structured games; a faction being "opforce" usually implies them existing and operating for the sake of providing opposition for the actual player side. For example, their internal actions might not be simulated to the same full extent that the other side operates in, in the interest of playability.

D&D is almost always played in a configuration where the GM operates the opposing force in the form of a dungeon.

Orthodox D&D is my preferred jargon for the commercial mainline of D&D development. For example, we could say that orthodox D&D has always used Armor Class in its rules cruft, while that is not true for all D&D variations everywhere.

"Heterodox" or simply innovative would be the opposite: a D&D campaign that deviates from the orthodox mainline. Most campaigns are heterodox to some degree, of course. My own D&D is definitely out there in the boonies in this regard.

This usage might be confusing if you think that "D&D" specifically and only means orthodox D&D. It makes more

sense if you imagine my concern over the game being entirely substantial, detached from its commercial concerns; anything that is artistically D&D is D&D, regardless of corporate trademarks.

Oversight, see "Procedural oversight".

Positioning, see "Fictional positioning".

Precedent benchmarking is jargon for a common modeling tool used in old school D&D, where values are estimated on the basis of prior judgments. For example, the main reason we know that an orc is a 1 HD monster is that they're roughly as dangerous as humans, which we know to be 1 HD monsters. The "precedent" is the human's HD value, and the "benchmarking" is the act of comparing the orc to a human (in the fiction where orcs and our ideas of what they are like exist).

Procedural hygiene is a refereeing practice where you intentionally choose methods, procedures, and rules that reduce the possibility of unconscious bias in referee decision-making. Not merely the absense of corruption, but the avoidance of even the possibility. For example, pre-committing to rolling random encounter checks every Turn is more hygienic than choosing to do it when you feel like it because the latter involves a greater chance of inappropriate bias in the decision.

The concept is kinda important, see page 168 for more. And, "Procedural oversight" in the next entry for the complementary concept.

Procedural oversight is the process management concept of appointing an independent watcher to observe the execution of the process. Oversight can be performed in real time, or by after action review. Its purpose is to catch mistakes and improve the procedures.

Wargaming way inherently involves use of oversight at different levels and for different reasons: the referee oversees many player maneuvers that do not require direct referee participation, and the players oversee the referee's activities. The players check each other for process legitimacy, in other words.

The concept is discussed in context on page 165. Also, consider the complementary concept of "Procedural hygiene", just above.

Radical freedom is a heightened state of awareness about your own freedom to make choices that may, in fact, go against even social and cultural context. It's an old philosophical conceit (cynics were big on it, for instance), but the term itself is existentialist jargon from I think Jean-Paul Sartre.

When discussing the true creative agenda of the wargaming way, I find myself discussing authenticity a lot, and when discussing *that*, the actual climax of authentic practice in player perspective is entering radical freedom as regards the moves you make in the game. Instead of blindfolded ritual

action informed by preconception of what you're "supposed" to do, you think for yourself, choose for yourself, and the game enables this, allows us to see what happens next.

Realism is a traditional bugbear of RPG theory (and art theory in general, really), a word that can be used to mean just about anything. When I use it here, realism is the creative value of capturing a facet of reality in art. You are engaging in "realism" when, given the opportunity, investigation of reality is given precedence over other possible values such as genre emulation, rule of cool or romantic idealization. Realism is the position of anti-dramatism.

Old school D&D in general and the wargaming way, in particular, tends to have strong realistic leanings due to the simulative resolution processes the game engages in. The question in these processes is "given these fictional circumstances, how should the situation resolve?", which is ultimately a realistic concern, even when the fictional circumstances are representative of a fantastic reality different from our own.

Referee is an old-fashioned synonym for the Dungeon Master (a term used by D&D specifically) or Game Master (what has become the standard moniker in the RPG hobby). Other monikers that capture variations of the role are the likes of Judge, MC, Storyteller, etc. These all imply slightly different tasks and responsibilities in various games, so they're not *exactly* the same thing, but it is nevertheless clear that the GM is a shared institution across the majority of tabletop roleplaying.

In the present technical context, I use the term "referee" specifically to emphasize the unbiased nature of the wargaming GM. Most traditional RPGs underwrite a technical system where the GM is responsible for plotting and managing the game's events, fudging and presenting as a storyteller to make the experience ideal for everybody. A referee does not do that: their responsibility is fair scenario resolution.

Technically speaking D&D has two GM roles that are fairly easy to distinguish; they're mainly performed by a single participant for convenience and tradition. One is the referee, as discussed, and the other is the "opforce manager", the player responsible for bringing the dungeon (or another scenario) and conducting it against the rest of the players. In traditional wargaming the referee wouldn't also manage the opforce; adding this wrinkle was one of the innovations that D&D brought to prominence. When I need to emphasize the referee's role as the content manager I tend to just call them the Game Master; an example of how this jargon gets used for nuance.

Right to play is a pet theory of mine about campaign structure: because the campaign exists to be a platform of play, and the players participate in play as social equals, it follows that every player has a subjective right to actually participate in playing the game. Should the GM-referee accept this premise, they're obligated to rule in ways that are inclusive and fair towards the players being able to play.

This is obviously a useful principle to keep in game-external decision-making as well, but for our purposes the important implications concern scenario negotiation: the GM has an active duty to set up the rules of engagement in a way that allows all players to actually play. The most central implication is that players should usually be able to introduce some adventurer characters into the scenario, even where this might be otherwise an unlikely development. And where this is not possible, the scenario should be set aside or the GM should shape out something else meaningful for players to do.

If this seems very abstract, consider this application: when a player's character dies early in a session, it is good practice to allow the party to bring in a new character without too much logistical fuzz; maybe the party finds a new adventurer wandering in the dungeon, or they "were with the party all along", or whatever; the creative right to participate is nearly always more important than petty concerns over process realism.

Rule in game theory (not the math kind, the kind we're talking here) is a formally posited play process enforced by the social contract of the game.

One of the exceptional things going on in refereed wargaming, including old school D&D, is that the perceived rules of the game are applied by a live referee, which paradoxically makes them not rules at all in the technical sense; the actual rule is "GM declares a fair ruling based on established rules cruft, precedent and circumstance", with

the so-called rules lacking direct social contract enforcement. See "Rules cruft", below.

Rules cruft is the name I've coined for a specific kind of game rule that refereed wargaming and roleplaying produces. The concept is analogous to case law used in common law jurisprudence; ideally, cruft is created by the process of play and applied as precedent. The difference between rules as in the rules of MONOPOLY vs rules as in cruft is an evergreen source of issues for games like D&D that utilize cruft in their process.

I discuss the practical implications in a few places, see page 68 and page 164.

Rupee is my cutesy jargon for the current campaign's XP-standard coin. So if 1 GP = XP then GP is the rupee, and if 1 SP = XP then the SP is the rupee. It's occasionally useful to be able to talk about the "standard treasure coin" without specifying what that might be, as campaigns that are otherwise in comparable treasure XP standards often have different coinages.

Scene stack is funny jargon for a common way to prepare RPG scenarios: the GM prepares a linear "stack" of game content, typically encounters or scenes or similar. This is the normal way that almost all roleplaying games conceive of the task of GM prep: the GM imagines the play content of the coming session in advance and then prepares it similar to how a theatrical script outlines the scenes of a play.

The core play activity of wargaming D&D is not very compatible with scene stack prep, as players have the right to

retreat and generally just engage the scenario in non-linear ways. For the historically preferred scenario prep tech, see "Location-based scenario".

Scholarly value is the educational value that a roleplaying game has the potential to possess. It's important for wargaming as a direct creative stake: wargaming intrigues the intellect by providing the opportunity to learn by doing, by puzzling out issues that matter to humans. The core wargaming process of gaming out a conflict simulation is only meaningful due to the literary and scholarly values embedded in the scenario.

The interactive nature of roleplaying naturally means that scholarly substance is primarily treated by handling and practical application, which contrasts greatly with the traditional scholarly learning methods. Instead of being told how something is, you try it out yourself.

For some more in this, see page 188.

Setpiece scene is a bit of GM-prepared gaming material that leans less towards being a plain presentation of elements and more towards being carefully coordinated for effect. See "scene stack" for game prep relying primarily on setpieces.

For a practical example of a setpiece scene, consider the climatic scene of module AA7, The Sarcophagus Legion: the adventurers are looking to rescue the hapless victim of a black magician from a sacrificial ritual. Time is of the essence! The room key, however, tells us that the ritual is conveniently ready to start (and end in murder in three minutes) the moment the adventurers enter the room. The author has

abandoned dynamic procedure simulation in favour of a dramatic setpiece scene.

Setpiece prep is an important topic for the wargaming way due to how literally "setting the pieces" is a practical necessity and virtue of scenario prep, while also being the short devil's road towards middle school style dramaticism in D&D.

Simulative modeling is the underlying practice that wargaming, among other armchair hobbies and serious science, rests upon. We call it "simulating" or "modeling" when you try to capture the essential features of a real (or imaginary) phenomenon into a simplified abstract system. Usually in this context, the system is one of rules and procedures, and the purpose is to "game out" the result of a hypothetical situation. "Who would win if A and B were to fight?", in other words.

Modeling arts would be worthy of a book on their own, so I've mostly satisfied myself here with gesturing at the concept as being an integral part of how D&D is played in the wargaming way. Every time the referee makes a ruling on how the rules are applied to a circumstance, they engage in more or less trivial simulative modeling.

Sportsmanship is the moral good of engaging in play with honor. See page 183 for a short treatment.

System Mastery refers to the process of learning the formal rules material of the game, and the creative ethos of elevating that as a major concern for the game. The concept is important for D&D because it's such a linchpin of the new school playstyle. A game concerned with system mastery

features complicated rules that the players are expected to learn and apply, and that's pretty much the game.

Some extent of system mastery is present in all D&D I've seen, but the simulative program of the wargaming way makes it a secondary aesthetic and technical concern in this playstyle.

Traditional roleplaying game is historiographical jargon with plenty of potential for confusion. People often assume that "traditional" means "oldest", but the sense in which I use the word here is more "as developed and transmitted by the dominant tradition". Thus, "trad" or traditional RPGs are the roleplaying games typical of the mainstream tradition of roleplaying. It contrasts with "experimental" or "avant-garde" or other similar terms indicating attempts at making a clean break from the past.

The dominant tradition of RPGs starts in response to D&D, with games like RUNEQUEST, and then branches out into the hundreds of individual games that we know and recognize as normal, typical tabletop RPGs. A game is traditional when it exists in the context of its antecedent games, replicating and repeating their motifs and ideas.

For our purposes here the key takeaway is that old school D&D, a wargame created at a time when the tradition had yet to even begin, is not itself a trad rpg. It exists in contrast with what the "typical" RPG would come to be like. This is why it's such an interesting game for us latter-day gamers marinated in the tradition.

Tyranny of Fun is a neat piece of late 'oos OSR rpg theory, by Melan. Succinctly put, the thesis is that D&D involves creative values that cannot be captured by a design heuristic that focuses on player pleasure. A design developed to be merely pleasant fails to be challenging, provocative and a growing experience for the audience.

The tyranny of fun is an important implicit assumption of game industry; modern video game design is generally predicated on the notion that games are intended to serve man with facile ease. As I understand it, Melan was particularly inspired by the 4th edition of D&D himself on this.

Wargaming way is what I've been calling the specific playstyle doctrine that I'm trying to exposit on in MUSTER. You wouldn't believe how difficult it is to name a playstyle or school of art in a halfway satisfactory manner. For the longest time, I called it "challengeful adventuring", which doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. "Dungeonspiel" and "wargamey D&D" didn't entice either.

(Nota bene: RPG theorists are famously really bad at naming things. You end up with issues.)

While the term sounds a little bit like I'm just vaguely gesturing towards "play the way wargames are played", the manifesto at the start of the book hopefully makes it clear that I'm more using the phrase as a name for a specific doctrine. Not many wargames today actually subscribe to unbiased refereeing, simulative rules, and real challenge, which cornerstones I identify as central to the practice here. They

are also accidentally central to traditional kriegsspiel, whence the constant conjuring in the name of "wargaming".

This will no doubt fall on deaf ears, but the way I think about it, the wargaming way is one specific verbalized school of how to play old school D&D. I'm not trying to own the entire concept of old school D&D here, and I'm not claiming that the wargaming way is how people "really" played in the '70s. That's not the discussion I'm having here. Just, sharing my experience of one satisfying and fun way to play.

XP economy is design jargon for the overarching game structures related to scoring points: what actions qualify for points, how the award is quantified, and perhaps most importantly, how these standards affect player behavior in the downstream of practical play.

I hope that proved amusing and enlightening, I tried to not be boring in there. I imagine that the theoretically inclined reader will find more insight into the formation and application of technical jargon online. Perhaps come in for a chat.

Further Reading

Practice is key to excellence, but you might also want to read some more books. I'm not a top scholar of D&D literature myself, but I've obviously read a few things, so here's my short list of stuff that you might wish to expand to from here:

More Primers

Muster is a "primer", a preparatory text that attempts to provide a useful theoretical context for actually trying to play D&D. I didn't invent the idea myself, I think Matt Finch did.

A Quick Primer for Old School Gaming (2008) is Finch's classic 12-page manifesto. Intended for gamers experienced in modern D&D, juxtaposing technical differences to cast light on the creative concerns underneath.

Principia Apocrypha (2018) by David Perry is a slightly longer text, attacking the topic with a list of adjudication dictums. An interesting alternate vision for us here, I believe; similar precepts, but a different creative theory of the game.

Philotomy's Musings (2007) by Jason Cone is not strictly speaking a primer so much as it is an exegesis of the original '74 D&D rules text, explaining how and why the author uses these old rules. Excellent if you have the creative theory down but want to see how they play D&D with random stat lines.

A Player's Handbook (2018) is a post by Chris McDowall on his BASTIONLAND blog. Uniquely player-directed and compact among these picks.

The Roleplaying Game Primer and Old School Playbook (2014) by Chris Gonnerman is a comprehensive and practically focused primer, almost like the introductory "this is what roleplaying is like" parts of a pedagogically oriented game text. Solid technicals, and by far the most practical choice for the damned soul who just wanted a book that explains *how to play* before stumbling on MUSTER.

How to get started playing old school for free (2018) at the DUNGEONS & POSSUMS blog is basically this entire chapter except better because it's direct hyperlinks to these books and other sources, organized into a helpful generic primer.

I think that all of the above sources are immediately at least 80% compatible with the "wargaming way" we've been discussing here, should be easy going to contrast and compare. Heck, go read them and maybe you'll find a better exegesis of old school D&D for your own purposes.

Game Texts

There are two reasons to study game texts: one is simply to find a text you want to use as a jumping-off point for your own campaign; the other is to extend your study of campaign development, including rules design. Pick out the best ideas and incorporate them into your own practice.

For an easy starter, I recommend the Basic flavor rules text of your preference. "Basic D&D" is a specific range of old TSR products that actually aren't that bad for a beginner even today. Their main weaknesses are the childish brand flanderization and an inclination towards mediocre, hacky game design. Still, the Moldway Basic (1981) is wonderfully concise, while Mentzer Basic (1983) really spells out the practical procedures with extreme detail. The Basic line was affected far less by the middle school transition that took over AD&D over the '80s, so the creative thrust of these texts is mostly compatible with the wargaming way.

You can probably do better than these old texts in today's world, though. For example, I like any of these for various nitpicky reasons myself:

Labyrinth Lord (2007)
Swords & Wizardry (2008)
Lamentations of the Flame Princess (2010)

Really though, there's a huge number of basic D&D texts, I haven't perused nearly all of them carefully. The technical differences between all of these game texts are really quite

minor for our purposes, they're all restating what amounts to the same game. I expect any referee to quickly houserule themself into the wilderness anyway, so which one you start with really isn't that important. Just pick one you like the look of or that's conveniently available, and switch out until you hit one that works for you.

For adventure material just read and play what seems interesting to you. Just to throw out a benchmark, I recommend the laconic masterpiece Dyson's Delve (2010) by the eponymous Dyson Logos; it's a clear, modern, beginner-friendly dungeon adventure of the traditional type, without the distracting bells and whistles usually published in adventure modules.

For studies in depth, you want to read foundational texts and unusual variations to broaden your horizons. I'll just list some suggestions of what I've found noteworthy myself:

The original '74 Dungeons & Dragons is invaluable for context and inspiration for the advanced student. Such historical investigation continues with Chainmail (the miniatures wargame D&D developed from), original game line supplements, the early years of the Dragon magazine, and as much grungy grognard history as you feel you need.

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (1977) was enormously influential in its time, but I would characterize it as a matter for advanced study today, a source of variations more than the foundational text it was back then. Full of half-baked and outright bad ideas, AD&D should be taken with a grain of salt.

Beyond the classics, the main concern of study are the technical variations, the tools that other referees have used in their campaigns. Hobby magazines were the best places to find variations (house rules, variant rules, new ideas) for the longest time, but with the advent of the Internet, and certain changes in the publishing environment, you can just find a crazy amount of innovative D&D work being published all the time in small press or as free culture. Game texts like, say, the compact garage zine style Backswords & Bucklers (2010), or the gorgeously-produced Dungeon Crawl Classics (2012), offer complete details on the rules and procedural conventions used by other experienced referees.

(Really, I'm not kidding when I say that there is an outpouring of relevant, excellent material being produced by true masters of the game out there. I couldn't mention them all by name here, it'd be another full book to do any justice to tracing the ludography of the old school renaissance.)

Tunnels & Trolls (1975), the Fighting Fantasy RPG (1984), Mazes & Minotaurs (2007), and other similar fantasy adventure wargames forsake the technical rules chassis of D&D while retaining nigh identical creative structure. Basically, you totally can play this extensive nimbus of D&D-like games in the wargaming way, too! Obviously highly relevant for advanced D&D work, when you're looking to develop novel techniques and scenarios.

Backer Credits

I've been pondering something like Muster since the late '00s, but who has the time to actually write? Well, apparently finding a veritable choir of patrons who believe in me enough to put some money down on a little free culture project is the kind of serious commitment that got this thing done. Thanks to everybody for believing in this and existing as a surprisingly amiable shadow council in my procrastinating imagination.

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William Dowie
Tony Dowler
Jon Edwards
Stephen Faure
Wilhelm Fitzpatrick
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Avram Grumer
Matthew Gushta
Michael Haak
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Sandra Snan
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Steven Warble
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Tuomas Vauhkonen
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fencerx
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Tschesae
Uppsala
Vesala
wil_mer89
vwallen

Extras

AUTHOR ARGUING WITH THE ARTIST, *a study in color coordination.*

The travails of book development left us with an extra icon. It's as acheiropoietic as you can get in capitalist society, having slipped through the cracks of art commission, yet nevertheless fallen fully formulated into our hands, excess to requirements.

I'm personally quite fond of Sipi's smith here, for all that he doesn't have a natural place in the book. He's focused yet calm, putting together the curls and whorls of his masterwork. Master of his game.

The hobby scene likes its brand emblems, so making more doesn't have much of a point, but I guess it could be the icon for something or other.

Not another "new game", that's for sure; the longer I play, the more it feels like couching innovation and polish in the vocabulary of product only serves to maintain consumer-producer relations. What use a new game when you barely understand the old.