

A Quick Primer for Old School Gaming



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This booklet is an introduction to “old school” gaming, designed especially for anyone who started playing fantasy role-playing games after, say, the year 2000 – but it’s also for longer-time players who have slowly shifted over to modern styles of role-playing over the years.

If you want to try a one-shot session of *Oe* using the free *Swords & Wizardry* rules, just printing the rules and starting to play as you normally do will produce a completely pathetic gaming session – you’ll decide that *Oe* is just missing all kinds of important rules. What makes *Oe* different from later games isn’t the rules themselves, it’s how they’re used. In fact, there’s such a big difference between the *Oe* style of play and the modern style of play that I’ve described four “Zen Moments” where a fundamental modern gaming concept is turned completely on its head by the *Oe* approach. These are areas where your most basic assumptions about gaming probably need to be reversed, if you want to experience what real *Oe* playing is all about. I call them Zen Moments because they sound completely and impossibly wrong to the modern gamer’s ear, but once you accept the mirror-image logic of this approach, it suddenly makes sense as a system, like the reversed world of *Alice-in-the-Looking-Glass*.

In General: Four Zen Moments

Playing an old-style game is very different from modern games where rules cover many specific situations. The *Oe* rules don’t give you much specific guidance, and that’s not because they left out the answers to save space. Treat it like a game you’ve never seen before, a game where the rules give guidelines and the referee interprets those guidelines.

First Zen Moment: Rulings, not Rules

Most of the time in old-style gaming, you don’t use a rule; you make a ruling. It’s easy to understand that sentence, but it takes a flash of insight to really “get it.” The players can describe any action, without needing to look at a character sheet to see if they “can” do it. The referee, in turn, uses common sense to decide what happens or rolls a die if he thinks there’s some random element involved, and then the game moves on. This is why characters have so few numbers on the character sheet, and why they have so few specified abilities. Many of the things that are “die roll” challenges in modern gaming (disarming a trap, for example) are handled by observation, thinking, and experimentation in old-style games. Getting through obstacles is more “hands-on” than you’re probably used to. Rules are a resource for the referee, not for the players. Players use observation and description as their tools and resources: rules are for the referee only.

A simple example: the pit trap. By tradition, many pit traps in 0e are treated as follows. They can be detected easily, by probing ahead with a 10ft pole. If you step onto one, there is a 1 in 6 chance that the pit trap will open. And that's all there is to it. By contrast, modern games usually contain character classes with specific abilities to detect and disarm traps. Let's take a look at how a pit trap might be handled according to the 0e and the modern approaches.

Note: The modern-style GM in these examples is a pretty boring guy when it comes to adding flavor into his game. This isn't done to make modern-style gaming look bad: we assume most people reading this booklet regularly play modern-style games and know that they aren't this boring. It's done to highlight when and how rules are used in modern gaming, as opposed to when and how they aren't used in old-style gaming. So the modern-style GM talks his way through all the rules he's using, which isn't how a good modern-style GM usually runs his game.

The Pit Trap (Modern Style)

GM: "A ten-foot wide corridor leads north into the darkness."

John the Rogue: "I check for traps."

GM: "What's your target number for checking?"

John the Rogue: "15."

GM: Decides that the pit trap in front of the party is "standard," so all John has to do is roll a 15 or better. "Roll a d20."

John the Rogue: "16."

GM: "Probing ahead of you, you find a thin crack in the floor – it looks like there's a pit trap."

John the Rogue: "Can I disarm it?"

GM: "What's your target number for that?"

John the Rogue: "12. I rolled a 14."

GM: "Okay, moving carefully, you're able to jam the mechanism so the trap won't open."

John the Rogue: "We walk across. I go first."

The Pit Trap (Old Style)

GM: "A ten-foot wide corridor leads north into the darkness."

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

GM: Is about to say that the pole pushes open a pit trap, when he remembers something. "Wait, you don't have the ten foot pole any more. You fed it to the stone idol." [if the party still had the pole, John would have detected the trap automatically]

John the Roguish: "I didn't feed it to the idol, the idol ate it when I poked its head."

GM: "That doesn't mean you have the pole back. Do you go into the corridor?"

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

GM: Mulls this over, because there's a pit trap right where John is looking. But it's dark, so "No, there are about a million cracks in the floor. You wouldn't see a pit trap that easily, anyway." [A different referee might absolutely decide that John sees the trap, since he's looking in the right place for the right thing].

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

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

John the Roguish: "Like there's a covered pit trap?"

GM: "Could be."

John the Roguish: "Can I disarm it?"

GM: "How?"

John the Roguish: "I don't know, maybe make a die roll to jam the mechanism?"

GM: "You can't see a mechanism. You step on it, there's a hinge, you fall. What are you going to jam?"

John the Roguish: "I don't know. Okay, let's just walk around it."

GM: "You walk around it, then. There's about a two-foot clearance on each side."

Another Example:

The Ninja Jump (Modern)

We enter this example in the middle of combat.

GM: "You're up on the ten-foot high ledge, and down below, the goblin is about to attack Frank the Cleric."

John the Roguish: "I grasp my sword, blade downward, and leap off the ledge, driving the sword blade deep into the goblin's back using the weight of my body and the fall to cause tons of extra damage."

GM: "Seriously?"

John the Roguish: "Yeah."

Frank the Cleric: "Oh, hell, here we go again."

GM: "What feat are you using?"

John the Roguish: "I don't have a feat for it. I want to try it anyway. Untrained."

GM: "You don't have a leap attack or spring attack or anything like that?"

John the Roguish: "Nope."

GM: "It's just a regular attack, then. You might be able to get extra damage if you had a trained skill that applied."

John the Roguish: "Okay, I rolled a 2."

GM: "That's a miss. And you fall to a prone position."

John the Roguish: "Hey, that's not fair. If it's just a normal attack, there shouldn't be a chance for me to fall prone. If I had some chance to get a benefit I can see it, but I started from a good tactical position and I didn't get anything but a regular attack with an automatic chance to end up prone. That's not fair."

GM: "Okay, but even if you had a +2 from being up above, you still missed."

John the Roguish: "I'm just saying there's nothing in the rules that says I should end up prone after making that attack."

Frank the Cleric: "I attack the goblin."

GM: "Okay, I'll tell you what. Roll against your jump skill with a target number of 10, and if you succeed then you stay standing."

Frank the Cleric: "I attack the goblin."

John the Roguish: "I rolled a 9, but I have a dex modifier of +2, so it's an 11."

GM: "Okay, you're still standing."

Frank the Cleric: "I attack the goblin."

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Frank the Cleric: “Oh, hell, here we go again.”

GM: [decides that he’ll give John a to-hit roll. Success will let him get extra damage, but failure will cause some sort of disaster.] “You leap off the ledge. Roll to hit.”

John: “I rolled a 2.”

GM: “Okay, you trip as you jump off the ledge and you get tangled up with the sword. You knock the goblin down to the ground, but you don’t land on your feet either. You’re both sprawled on the floor. Also, you may have hit yourself when you landed on the goblin. Roll to hit again.”

John: “I rolled a 15.”

GM: “You stab yourself in the leg. Roll damage.”

Frank the Cleric: “Roll high.”

John the Roguish: “Screw you, Frank. I roll a 2.”

GM: “Two points of damage, then. You don’t take any falling damage, because the goblin broke your fall. You’re on the ground and so is he. Frank’s standing there with his mace, completely confused by what just happened.”

Frank the Cleric: “While the goblin’s sprawled on the ground, I slay him with a mighty blow of my mace.”

GM: “Roll to hit.”

John the Roguish: “I don’t see why I should be down on the ground.”

GM: “You rolled a 2, that’s a crappy roll, you got tangled in your sword, and you’re on the ground. You would have done double damage if you hit.”

John the Roguish: “Where’s that in the books?”

GM: “It’s not. I just made it up. Frank, roll to hit.”

Second Zen Moment: Player Skill, not Character Abilities

Original D&D and Swords & Wizardry are games of skill in a few areas where modern games just rely on the character sheet. You don’t have a “spot” check to let you notice hidden traps and levers, you don’t have a “bluff” check to let you automatically fool a suspicious city guardsman, and you don’t have a “sense motive” check to tell you when someone’s lying to your character. You have to tell the referee where you’re looking for traps and what buttons you’re pushing. You have to tell the referee whatever tall tale you’re trying to get the city guardsman to believe. You have to decide for yourself if someone’s lying to your character or telling the truth. In a 0e game, you are always asking questions, telling the referee exactly what your character is looking at, and experimenting with things. Die rolls are much less frequent than in modern games.

Also: these games aren’t simulations of what a dwarf raised in a particular society, and having a particular level of intelligence, would do when faced with certain challenges. Old-style play is about keeping your character alive and making him into a legend. The

player's skill is the character's guardian angel – call it the character's luck or intuition, or whatever makes sense to you, but don't hold back on your skill as a player just because the character has a low intelligence. Role-playing is part of the game, but it's not a suicide pact with your character.

Know when to run. A good GM is impartial: he doesn't favor the party, and he doesn't favor the monsters. But he's not playing a tournament against the players, where he's restricted by rules and required to offer up well-gauged, well-balanced challenges. Instead, he's there to be an impartial referee for the characters' adventures in a fantasy world – NOT in a "game setting." Even on the first level of a dungeon, there might be challenges too difficult for a first-level party of adventurers. Ask the one-armed guy in the tavern; he may know. If you didn't think of checking the tavern for one-armed men, consider it a comment on your skill as a player.

Third Zen Moment: Heroic, not Superhero

Old-style games have a human-sized scale, not a super-powered scale. At first level, adventurers are barely more capable than a regular person. They live by their wits. But back to the Zen moment. Even as characters rise to the heights of power, they aren't picking up super-abilities or high ability scores. Truly high-level characters have precious items accumulated over a career of adventuring; they usually have some measure of political power, at least a stronghold. They are deadly when facing normal opponents ... but they aren't invincible. Old school gaming (and again, this is a matter of taste) is the fantasy of taking a guy without tremendous powers – a guy much like yourself but somewhat stronger, or with slight magic powers – and becoming a king or a feared sorcerer over time. It's not about a guy who can, at the start of the game, take on ten club-wielding peasants at once. It's got a real-world, gritty starting point. And your character isn't personally ever going to become stronger than a dragon. At higher levels, he may be able to kill a dragon with his sword or with spells, but never by grabbing its throat and strangling it in a one-on-one test of strength. To make a comic-book analogy, characters don't become Superman; they become Batman. And they don't start as Batman – Batman is the pinnacle. He's a bit faster than normal, a bit stronger than normal, he's got a lot of cash, a Bat Cave, a butler, a henchman (Robin) and cool gadgets. But he can't leap tall buildings in a single bound. If you don't get a feeling of achievement with Batman instead of Superman as the goal, the old school gaming style probably isn't right for your vision of what makes good and exciting fantasy. Old school gaming is about the triumph of the little guy into an epic hero, not the development of an epic hero into a superhuman being. There's nothing wrong with the latter, it's just that old-style fantasy matches up with the former.

Fourth Zen Moment: Forget "Game Balance."

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

are against the GM. It's more like a story with dice: the players describe their actions, the referee describes the results, and the story of the characters, epic or disastrous, grows out of the combined efforts of referee and players. The referee will be just as surprised by the results as the players are.

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

One last point about game balance, though. Just as the players have no right to depend upon a rule in the book, the referee has no right, ever, to tell the player what a character decides to do. That's the player's decision (unless there's a charm spell going). The referee in an old-style game has much more "power" than in a modern game, and may become tempted to dictate what characters are doing as well. If this happens, the whole game becomes nothing more than one guy telling a story while others roll dice. Just as with a modern-style game, this sort of behavior severely damages the fun of the game. You don't make chess moves for your opponent in a game of chess, and the referee doesn't play the characters in the (or modern games, for that matter).

Tips for Players

- 1) View the entire area you've mapped out as the battleground; don't plan on taking on monsters in a single room. They may try to outflank you by running down corridors. Establish rendezvous points where the party can fall back to a secure defensive position.
- 2) Scout ahead, and try to avoid wandering monsters which don't carry much treasure. You're in the dungeon to find the treasure-rich lairs. Trying to kill every monster you meet will weaken the party before you find the rich monsters.
- 3) Don't assume you can defeat any monster you encounter.
- 4) Keep some sort of map, even if it's just a flow chart. If you get lost, you can end up in real trouble – especially in a dungeon where wandering monster rolls are made frequently.
- 5) Ask lots of questions about what you see. Look up. Ask about unusual stonework. Test floors before stepping.
- 6) Protect the magic-user. He's your nuke.
- 7) Hire some cannon fodder. Don't let the cannon fodder start to view you as a weak source of treasure.
- 8) Spears can usually reach past your first rank of fighters, so a phalanx of hirelings works well.
- 9) Check in with the grizzled one-armed guy in the tavern before each foray; he may have suddenly remembered more details about the area.

Tips for the Game Master

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

Tao of the GM: The Way of the Ming Vase

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

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

Tao of the GM: The Way of the Moose Head

Without spot checks and automatic information gathering rolls, players don't have a way to generate solutions by rolling dice and checking their character sheets. They have to think. That's how player skill comes into the game. Compare these two examples of exploring a room where a secret compartment is hidden behind a moose head on the wall.

The Mysterious Moose Head (Modern Style)

John the Rogue: “We open the door. Anything in the room?”

GM: “No monsters. There’s a table, a chair, and a moose head hanging on the wall.”

John the Rogue: “I search the room. My search skill is +5. I roll a 19, so that’s a 24.”

GM: “Nice roll. You discover that the moose head slides to the side, and there’s a secret panel behind it.”

The Mysterious Moose Head (Old Style)

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

GM: “No monsters. There’s a table, a chair, and a moose head hanging on the wall.”

John the Roguish: “We check the ceiling and the floor – we don’t step in yet. If there’s nothing on the ceiling and the floor, we push down on the floor with the ten foot pole, and then I step inside, cautiously.”

GM: “Nothing. You’re in the room.”

John the Roguish: “I search the room.”

GM: “What are you checking?”

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

GM: “Nope.”

John the Roguish: “Are the moose’s eyes following me or anything?”

GM: “No.”

John the Roguish: “I check the moose head.”

GM: “How?”

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

GM: “When you check to see if it tips sideways, it slides a little to the side.”

John the Roguish: “I slide it more.”

GM: “There’s a secret compartment behind it.”

In other words, die rolls don’t provide a short cut or a crutch to discover and solve all those interesting puzzles and clues scattered throughout a dungeon. The same goes for handling traps (unless there’s a thief class), and the same goes for

You might be saying to yourself: “God, that sounds time-consuming.” Sure enough, this sort of detailed exploration of the adventure area occupies more time in old-style gaming than it does in modern gaming. 0e is a game of exploration, searching, and figuring things out just as much as it’s a game of combat. Game designers, over the years, decided that the game should focus on the fighting and the more cinematic moments of the game, with less time “wasted” on the exploration and investigation side of things. Over time, more and more detail was put into combat rules; and die rolls replaced the part of the game that focused on mapping, noticing details, experimentation, and deduction. Don’t conclude, though, that the exploration part of the game makes everything slower. Combat is so much faster-paced in 0e that there’s more time available for the exploration/thinking part of the game. In my experience, a session of 0e allows the players to get through many more combats and investigations than the same amount of gaming time would permit using Third Edition D&D. Fourth Edition D&D seems to have a faster combat system than Third Edition (the game hasn’t been out long enough, at the time of this writing, for me to have played more than three sessions), but what I’ve said above still seems to be true – perhaps to a lesser degree.

Tao of the GM: Your Abstract Combat-Fu Must be Strong

One criticism that's often leveled against old-style gaming is that it's boring to just have a series of: "I roll a d20. Miss. I roll a d20. Hit. I roll a d20. Miss. I roll a d20. Miss." Except for very quick and unimportant combats, old-style combats aren't done like this, or it would indeed be a little boring.

The reason old-style combat isn't boring – and in fact it's often much more colorful than modern-style combat – is because of things that aren't in the rules but are in the combats. In these games, a player can describe and attempt virtually anything he can think of. He doesn't need to have any sort of game-defined ability to do it. He can try to slide on the ground between opponents, swing from a chandelier and chop at a distant foe, taunt an opponent into running over a pit trap ... whatever he wants to try. That doesn't, of course, mean that he'll succeed. It's your job to handle these attempts colorfully and fairly, choosing whatever probability you think is the right one and rolling some dice. Sometimes the answer is just, "there's no way that's going to work; I'm not even going to roll for it." When the players truly understand – and it may take a while – that they truly aren't constrained by abilities, feats, skills or rules, you'll find that combat becomes quite interesting.

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

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

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

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

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

So that’s why combat is abstract, or at least it’s one reason. Also, of course, fast combat mimics the pace of combat – in more complex games, players may have to sit for a while, contemplating the next “move” like a chess game. I’ve heard of egg timers being used to limit thinking time. With old-style, abstract combat, this just doesn’t happen (not often, anyway). Abstract combat also opens the door for one of the things that’s most important about old-style gaming – the freewheeling feel of “anything goes.”

Tao of the GM: Way of the Donner Party

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

It takes artistry on your part: higher level adventures shouldn't be about declining food and light sources, they should be about declining hit points and spells. In lower level adventures, food and light sources can be the key to success or failure of an expedition (remember, 0e is about the little guy).

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

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

Final reminders:

You are the rulebook. There is no other rulebook.

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

How to Get Started

Step 1: Read the Zen moments. If they don't create a sudden mental “click,” skim through them again after reading the rules of the 0e game you're going to play. Actually seeing the rules may make it easier to get the “click.”

Step 2: Download a copy of Swords & Wizardry (from Lulu.com), or of the Original D&D Rulebooks (available at Paizo and elsewhere). Swords & Wizardry presents the 0e rules more clearly and in a modern format, and you might want to use Swords &

Wizardry as a “bridge” edition for seeing the 0e rules all in one place and presented in a familiar format. If you decide you love this style of play, the original 0e books have much more depth and flavor than Swords & Wizardry.

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

Step 4: Decide on an adventure to run. I’m working on an intro module called “Tomb of the Iron God” as a free download, but there are many other options.

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

Step 6: Run the adventure, and enjoy!