The Role-Playing Game Primer
and Old School Playbook



Chris Gonnerman

Role-Playing Game Primer and Old School Playbook
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Introduction

So you've heard about role-playing games (also called RPGs), and you think they sound interesting. Hanging out with friends, playing the role of heroic warrior or crafty thief or clever wizard, braving wilderness or dungeon, fighting monsters and bringing back treasure. What could be better? Quite possibly you've played RPG-style video games; that's cool, but trust me, there's nothing like playing a game in person with others.

But learning to play a traditional paper-and-pencil RPG has always required finding someone to teach you. RPG-style video games are run by the computer (or game console, or tablet, or whatever), while paper-and-pencil role-playing games are run by a person called a Game Master. But what if you don't know any Game Masters? It's really tough to get into RPGs without an experienced GM to teach you.

This book is an attempt to remedy that situation. I'm going to start with the basics, guiding you by example through the art of playing RPGs and of becoming a Game Master. When you finish this book, my hope is that you will know enough to start your own game.

I'm writing this book using the Basic Fantasy Role-Playing Game as an example. There are many different RPG systems with varied styles and game mechanics, but the things that are the hardest for beginners to learn are, thankfully, pretty much universal. Learn to play Basic Fantasy RPG and you'll be able to learn to play other RPGs pretty easily. Later in the book, I'll discuss some other Old School game systems, and I promise, I'll explain what it means to be "Old School."

So find yourself a comfy chair, sit back and relax, turn the page and we'll jump right in.

Part 1: An Example of Play

Let's look in on a Game Master introducing a group of newbie players to the game...

Rolling Up Characters

Chris: Welcome! Please, have a seat at the table. Glad you all could make it! I understand you've never played a paper-and-pencil role-playing game before... well, don't worry, I'm going to take it slow here.

You'll see I've laid out some funny-looking dice on the table for each of you. If you decide you like playing RPGs, you'll probably want some of your own, but for now I have plenty to go around. I'll explain them to you as we go along. I've also given each of you a couple of sheets of scratch paper, a pencil, and a character record sheet. That's the form with all the boxes on it. I'll go over what each bit means when you need to know about it.

Mike: Hey, I've got a question. Where's the board?

Chris: There isn't one. Role-playing games are played in the mind. Sometimes we use miniature figures to play out fights, but we're not going to do that today.

Sandy: We're not going to have any fights?

Chris: Ha, no. We're not going to use any miniatures, but I'm pretty sure there will be a fight or two.

Now, let's get started. The game I'm going to run today is the Basic Fantasy RPG. In Basic Fantasy, you can play as a human, an elf, a dwarf, or a halfling, and one of the first things you need to do is decide what you want to play.

Joe: I want to play a big barbarian, kind of like Conan.

Chris: Okay, so you're playing a human, and it sounds like you want to play him as a fighter.

Mike: Oh, so this is like in a video game, you have to choose what class you want to play, right? So what classes are there?

Chris: In Basic Fantasy you can play as a cleric, fighter, magic-user, or thief.

Sandy: What about druids?

Chris: Basic Fantasy RPG has just the basic four races and the basic four classes, but there are supplements that offer things like druids or rangers or gnomes or whatever. Since you're just learning, though, I'm not going to use any supplements.

Sandy: Oh. Okay, well, then I'd like to play a thief. I like being sneaky.

Chris: Any of the races can be a thief, so which would you prefer?

Sandy: I don't know. Is a halfling something like Frodo?

Chris: Sort of, yeah. So she's going to be a halfling thief?

Sandy: Yeah. Hey, wait... do I have to play a female?

Chris: No, if you want to play a male character, that's up to you.

Sandy: Um... nah, she's a girl. Female halfling thief.

Chris: Write that on your character sheet. There are spaces for race, class, and gender.

Mike: And I want to play an elf wizard.

Chris: Okay, good. The next thing to do is to roll some ability scores. Who wants to go first?

Joe: Me! What do I roll?



Chris: Each of your six ability scores is rolled on 3d6. That's three six-sided dice, like this one here. Some have dots or "pips" on them, and that's fine, but I like numerals.

Joe: Okay, here I go. 3, 3, and 5. Is that good?

Chris: When you roll multiple dice like that, you usually add them together. That's a total of 11, which is pretty average,

actually. Don't worry, you get five more tries. You roll and I'll write them down for you.

Joe: *(Rolling dice.)* 16! That's good, right? 12, 11, 6... ouch, not so good. One more? 10. Now what?

Chris: You said you wanted to play a big barbarian, right? So I'd suggest you put that 16 into your Strength score. All the other scores are average except for that 6. You have to choose between Intelligence, Wisdom, Dexterity, Constitution, or Charisma... basically that means you have to decide if your character is stupid, foolish, clumsy, sickly, or unpleasant to be around.

Mike: Put it in your Charisma, Joe. Being a barbarian isn't a popularity contest, right?

Joe: Um, maybe... no, I'm putting it in my Intelligence. Being a barbarian isn't about being smart either.

Chris: Okay, so write those numbers down in the boxes on your character sheet. Each ability score that isn't average has a bonus or penalty, which goes in the box next to the score. I'll save you looking it up in the rulebook... the bonus for 16 is +2, and the penalty for 6 is -1. Just write those numbers down and I'll explain them later. Now, who's next?

Sandy: I'll go. *(Rolling.)* 13, 10, 10, 9, 6, 17. Now what?

Chris: As a thief, you'll want your Dexterity to be pretty good. That 17 gives you a bonus of +2, and the 13 is worth a +1 bonus. I suggest you put one of those in your character's Dexterity.

Sandy: I'll put the 17 there, then. Where should I put my other bonus?

Chris: In your Strength, it will help you when you use a melee weapon. That's one like a sword or warhammer. If you put it in your Intelligence or Wisdom, it won't do much except help you resist certain magic spells. If you put it in Constitution, it will give you more hit points... those matter when you get into a fight. If you put it in Charisma, it will help you convince non-player characters to do what you want, or at least not kill you.

Mike: Non-player characters? That's like the characters the computer controls in a video game, right?

Chris: Yes, exactly. In this game, I'm the Game Master, and I'll be playing all the non-player characters. Each of you will play just the one we're rolling up now.

Mike: Wait a minute. How are we supposed to win when you are running everyone else and playing against us?

Chris: That's not how this game works. First of all, nobody ever wins, at least not in the sense that you're thinking of.

Joe: Huh? What fun is that?

Chris: The fun is in playing. It's my job to run the world your characters live in. I don't "win" by killing you off, I win when we all have a good time.

Sandy: Oh, good, I don't want my character to die.

Chris: Well, now, hold on. If there's no chance your character can die, what challenge would there be? No, it's possible your character might get killed, or something else bad might happen to her. It's my job to be fair and reasonable, not to help your characters and not to hurt them.

Let me put it another way. I don't want to kill your characters, but some of my NPCs or monsters might decide they want to.

Sandy: Oh, okay. I guess that makes sense. Anyway, I'm going to put my 13 into my Constitution. That's good, right?

Chris: Sure. When you roll for your hit points later, we'll add the bonus to the total. What about that 6? It gives a penalty of -1.

Sandy: I'm putting it in her Wisdom.

Mike: Oh, great, a foolish thief!

Chris: Mike, I think it's your turn now. Grab up those dice and get rolling.

Mike: *(Rolling dice.)* 10, 12, 7, 8, 9, 11. Ouch, those rolls aren't very good, are they?

Chris: No, I'm afraid not. But don't worry. I don't think a really wimpy character is any fun to play. A lot of GM's will let you reroll your stats, or even roll extra dice to get better numbers. What I'm going to let you do is flip your scores. Subtract all of them from 21, and write down the six new scores.

Mike: 11, 9, 14, 13, 12, 10. What bonuses does that give me?

Joe: I've got the rulebook right here, Mike. It says the 14 and the 13 are both +1 and the others are average.

Chris: Thanks, Joe. So Mike, now you need to put those scores on your sheet.

Mike: Wizards are supposed to be smart, right? So I'll put the 14 in my Intelligence. I think I'll put the 13 into my Charisma, since I suspect my character will be the one doing any negotiating.

Chris: Ha, yeah. A barbarian who's not very smart and a thief who's kind of foolish... it would probably be best if your character did all the talking.



Now let's get things finished up here. Each of you needs to roll for hit points. Fighters like Joe's character roll eight sided dice, or d8's, for their hit points. That's this one here. Magic-users and thieves both roll four sided dice, or d4's, for hit points. Those are the ones that look like little pyramids; you don't really roll them, you sort of flip them in the air, and read the number that's upright after they land. If any of you were playing a cleric, they'd roll six sided dice. Your characters are all starting at first level, so each of you needs to roll one die for starting hit points.



Sandy: I got a 4!

Chris: Great! Don't forget to add the Constitution bonus to that. Your character starts with 5 hit points.

Joe: I rolled a 7!

Chris: Very good.

Mike: Ug. I rolled a 1. Do I get to "flip" it?

Chris: No. But I'm not going to make you play with one hit point, so just roll again.

Mike: There, I got a 3. That's better.

Chris: Now, I know there's more to be filled out on your character sheets, but I suggest you all fill in one more blank on your sheets, and then we can get started.

Sandy: Which blank?

Chris: All you need to do now is come up with a name for your character. How hard can that be?

You Meet In A Tavern

Chris: Your adventures start where many adventures have started... you meet in a tavern called the Green Dragon Inn, in a village called Lyrwenn on the shores of Lake Dyasa. Mike, we'll start with you. What does your elf wizard do?

Mike: Valdorian goes up to the bar and orders a glass of wine.

Chris: The barkeep says, "Wine? Hah. I run an establishment for drinkin', not sippin'. We got beer and that's it."

Mike: "Fine," I say, "give me a beer."

Chris: "That'll be a gold piece."

Mike: Um... does my character have any money?

Chris: Yes. Roll 3d6 and multiply the total by 10. You other two do that too. You start the game with that many gold pieces.

Mike: Okay, I rolled 12, so I start with 120 gold pieces. I pay him a gold piece and I drink my beer, slowly, looking around the room.

Chris: It's still a bit early in the day, so the bar is mostly empty. The few locals in the bar are pointedly ignoring you. Just then, a big guy, obviously a warrior, walks in. He stands there blinking, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim light in the tavern.

Joe: Is that my character? I named him Raneth.

Chris: Yes, that's him.

Joe: Okay, so I look around the tavern and I see an elf at the bar, right?

Chris: Yes. He's sipping a beer.

Joe: I walk up beside him and order a beer too. I rolled 100 gold pieces, so I guess I can afford it.

Chris: You haven't actually bought your adventuring equipment yet, so you don't want to spend it all.

Joe: Got it. No getting sloshed.

Sandy: Am I there yet?

Chris: Sure. You walk into the tavern, and the barkeep says, "Hey, we don't serve kids here!"

Sandy: Elanor – that's her name, by the way – says, "I'm a halfling, you big lug, and I want a beer." I've got 80 gold pieces, which I guess isn't much, but I think she really wants a beer.

Chris: "Och, sorry," he says, as she climbs up a barstool. "Here you go. One GP."

Joe: So now what?

Chris: Oh, I don't know... maybe talk among yourselves?

Mike: Valdorian tells the others he's looking for adventure.

Joe: "Adventure!" says Raneth. "As long as there are horrible monsters to slay and treasure to be had, I'm in."

Sandy: "Sure, sounds like fun."

Chris: Well, that was easy. Just then, a man comes into the tavern. "Someone help," he says, "my children have been kidnapped right out of my house!"

Sandy: Wait a minute. Aren't there police or something? Or do people just go into bars looking for adventurers when something goes wrong?

Chris: Maybe you should ask him.

Sandy: Fine, I will. Elanor goes up to the man and says, "Did you tell the authorities?"

Chris: He looks down at you, then drops to one knee and looks you in the eye. "They tunneled into my cellar. The city watchmen won't go into the hole. Please, I have a boy and a girl, and they took them both!"

Just then, the barkeep comes up behind you and says, "This town's lousy with old tunnels and such underneath. They say Lyrwenn was built on the ruins of an ancient city."

Joe: Raneth stomps over and says, "Don't worry, my good man, we'll rescue them! Lead us to your cellar!"

Mike: Don't we need some, you know, equipment first? And my character is a magic-user, right? So he needs some spells or something.

Chris: Indeed. Valdorian's master taught him one spell. *(Opens the rulebook and rolls a die.)* He knows the spell of **sleep**, which can knock out a group of monsters. He can cast the spell once a day.

Mike: Once a day? What do I do the rest of the time?

Chris: Lots of things. Magic-users don't fight all that well, but he can do basically anything a normal person could do. Hang in with us and you'll see.

Now, let's get your money spent. Joe, your character will need at least a weapon and some sort of armor or shield. Sandy, as a thief, your character can only wear leather armor. A thief can use any weapon, but halflings can only use small weapons in one hand, or medium weapons in two, and can't use large weapons at all. Mike, magic-users can't wear armor, and they don't train much with weapons, but Valdorian can use a dagger or a walking staff as a weapon. You'll all want to have backpacks to carry things, and provisions in case you're down there a while. Elanor needs a set of thieves' tools also.

Here's the rulebook. Let's get this done, and then you can move on to the dungeon.

Into The Tunnel

(A few minutes later, everyone has purchased equipment and written it down on their character sheets.)

Chris: The man leads you to his house. Along the way he tells you his name is Bertram, and that he is a journeyman leatherworker. His home is a small place in the poorer part of town. When you get there he introduces you to his wife Tilla. She's too beside herself with grief to speak to you.

Joe: So where's the tunnel? Raneth has a new battleaxe and he's itching to try it out!

Chris: Bertram leads you to his cellar. It's dark, and the ceiling is so low that Raneth bumps his head.

Sandy: Elanor's something like three feet tall, right? So I'm safe!

Chris: Bertram points out the tunnel to you. It's narrow and low, just big enough for Raneth to crawl through.

Joe: Ug. Crawling into a dark hole doesn't sound like a good idea.

Sandy: Can Elanor walk into it?

Chris: Yes, it's a good size for her.

Sandy: I'll scout ahead, then.

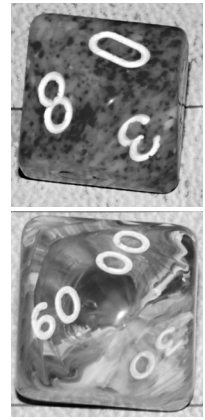
Chris: It's dark in there, and the only one of you who can see in the dark is Valdorian the elf.

Mike: Hey, I'm not going in first!

Sandy: Relax, elf, I've got this. I pull a torch out of my backpack and light it, and then I'll walk into the tunnel. Elanor can **move silently**, right?

Chris: Yes. A first level thief has a 25 percent chance to do that.

Sandy: Okay, so how do I roll for that?



Chris: When you need to make roll against a percent chance, you roll percentile dice. That's these two ten sided dice; one is marked in tens and one in ones, and you roll them both and add them together. Sometimes you just have dice numbered from 0 to 9, and you choose one to multiply by ten. It helps if they aren't the same color. If you roll two zeroes, the result is 100.

Sandy: Okay, so I roll these two here?

Chris: Hold on a moment, though. If you're rolling to move silently, and you fail, you'll know Elanor isn't being quiet. Sometimes in real life you think you're succeeding when you're not, you know? So whenever your character wouldn't know if she's successful or not, I roll the dice for you. *(Rolling.)* Okay, so moving as quietly as she can, Elanor walks into the tunnel, torch held out in front of her.

It slopes down sharply, and she goes about ten or fifteen paces before she sees the end of the tunnel. It looks like it opens into a good sized room, and it looks empty. As far as Elanor can see from inside the tunnel, anyway.

Sandy: I'll go ahead and walk into the room. Quietly, of course.

Chris: Of course. The room is thirty feet square. The walls, floor, and ceiling are stone. There are two doors here, one centered on the wall across from you and one centered in the wall to your left. There is a large pile of dirt and rubble on either side of the tunnel opening, and a trail of muddy footprints leading to the left-hand door.

Sandy: Footprints? What do they look like?

Chris: They are the prints of bare feet, small, like children.

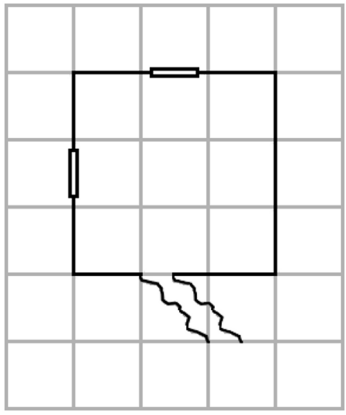
Sandy: Or halflings, maybe. Or maybe something else.

Mike: Guys, we probably need to make a map, or we'll get lost in these tunnels.

Chris: Here's a sheet of graph paper. I suggest you draw the room in the middle of the map, at a scale of one square equals ten feet.

Mike: So that's three squares by three squares, right?

Chris: Exactly. Let me show you. There's a traditional way we draw doors on dungeon maps, and no, I don't know why we draw them this way.



Sandy: Okay, so the room is empty, right?

Chris: Looks that way.

Joe: Hey, we're going to follow her down. I'll crawl in first, okay?

Mike: Sounds good to me. The wizard never goes in first.

Sandy: Before they get here, I'll sneak over to the door on the left and listen at it. There might be someone on the other side.

Chris: *(Rolling dice.)* You don't hear anything.

Sandy: Then I'll listen at the other door.

Chris: As you're about to put your ear up to the other door, it opens suddenly and you find yourself facing four ugly little men. Their skin is greenish, their ears are big and pointed, and they have spears pointed at you.

Sandy: Oops. Have Joe and Mike gotten into the room yet?

Chris: Glancing over her shoulder, Elanor sees Raneth just coming out of the tunnel.

Sandy: I run back and get behind him.

Joe: I hit them with my axe!

Chris: First we need to see who gets to go first. In a combat situation, everyone rolls for Initiative. Roll a six-sided die and add your Dexterity bonus. Sandy, you get to add Elanor's Dexterity bonus of +2, and an additional +1 because she's a

halfling. To keep things simple for me, I'm going to roll just once for all four of your opponents.

Mike: What about me? Is Valdorian in the room yet?

Chris: No, since the tunnel is so narrow and Joe went in front of you, your character will arrive in the next round. You'll have to sit this one out.

Joe: I rolled 3. Raneth doesn't have any bonus, right?

Chris: Correct. He's a human with average Dexterity.

Sandy: I rolled a 2. With my bonuses that's 5, right?

Chris: Yup. I guess I better roll... 2. Now we count down the Initiative numbers, with the highest going first. That'd be Elanor with a 5.

Sandy: Great, so like I said, I run back and get behind Joe's barbarian.

Chris: I'm going to say that you're close enough to the enemy for them to attack you, so if you make a full move away from them they have a chance to take a "parting shot" at you. But you can make a half move without giving them that chance... that's called making a "fighting withdrawal."

Sandy: Got it. How far can I move, then?

Chris: Normally, with no armor on Elanor could move up to 40 feet as a full movement, but since she's wearing leather armor her movement is reduced to 30 feet.

Sandy: So I can only move 15 feet without them stabbing me? Joe's character is further than that, isn't he?

Chris: Yes. But his Initiative is higher than theirs, so he'll get to move before them. In fact, it's his turn now. What will Raneth do?

Joe: I run over there and hit them with my axe!

Chris: Raneth moves past Elanor. His large body effectively blocks the door, so the green guys can't get past him to attack her.

Sandy: Thanks, big guy!

Joe: Now can I hit them with my axe?



Chris: Yes. To make an attack, you'll need your twenty sided die, or d20. It looks like this one.

Joe: Got it. What do I need to roll?

Chris: You're trying to roll at least as high as their **armor class**. You don't actually know what their armor class is, so you just make the roll, add your bonuses and tell me the total. Then I tell you if you hit.

Joe: I rolled a 12. What do I add?

Chris: We start with your **attack bonus**. All three of your characters have the same AB to start with... it's +1. As your characters gain levels the AB will go up, fast for the fighter, slower for the magic-user, in the middle for the thief. Since you're using a melee weapon, you also add your Strength bonus. More Strength makes it easier to get past your enemy's defenses.

Joe: Okay, so with Raneth's +2 Strength bonus and his attack bonus of +1, that's a total of 15. Did I hit?

Chris: You did. Now we need to know how much damage you did. Your battle axe does an eight sided die of damage, so roll 1d8. Add your Strength bonus to that roll as well, since hitting harder makes it hurt more.

Joe: I rolled 4, plus 2 is 6.

Chris: One of the monsters falls before your onslaught.

Joe: Yes!

Chris: Now the other three attack you. Since they are using spears, and you are taller than they are, all three of them can reach you. Raneth is wearing chain mail, which has an armor class of 15; that's the number the monsters need to beat to hit you. I'll just make the rolls... 11, 6, 14.

Joe: Great, they all missed me!

Chris: Not so fast. The monsters have an attack bonus of +1, so the last one got a total of 15. Now I roll damage. Their spears do 1d6 damage... 4 points. Raneth has 7 hit points normally; deducting 4 points leaves him with 3.

Joe: So one more hit could kill me?

Chris: Yup. Since everyone has acted, let's roll Initiative for the next round. Don't forget to add your bonuses. Mike, you're in the fight this round.

Sandy: 1, plus 3 is 4.

Joe: I got 6!

Mike: 4.

Chris: And the monsters have a 5. Joe, you're up first.

Joe: I hit them...

Mike and Sandy: "With my axe!"

Joe: Yeah! I rolled a 9. Plus 3 is 12. Do I hit?

Chris: No, sorry, you missed this time. Now they get to attack you... 16, 2, 3. One hit for 1d6 points of damage... it's a 2. Raneth has one hit point left.

Joe: Oh, crap.

Mike: Don't worry, I've got this. It's my turn, right? Valdorian casts his **sleep** spell on them.

Chris: The monsters have a chance to resist your spell. It's called a **saving throw**... I'll explain it more when you need to make one of your own. Wait a moment while I roll this... okay, two of them fell asleep, and one didn't. The one who is left suddenly feels a little outnumbered, and turns to run away. This gives Raneth a chance at a parting shot. Go ahead, Joe, and roll an attack.

Joe: Um... I rolled a 1, plus 3 is 4.

Chris: You missed. Just so you know, no matter how good your bonuses or how good the enemy's armor class, a natural roll of 1 is always a miss, and a natural 20 is always a hit.

Mike: Natural roll?

Chris: The number on the die is the natural roll.

Mike: Oh, the number without bonuses.

Chris: Exactly. Since Raneth missed, the monster gets away, leaving one dead and two sleeping.

Joe: We should kill the sleeping ones.

Sandy: Wait, they might know where the kids are. They're the right size for that tunnel, aren't they?

Chris: It certainly looks that way. They're little guys, about the same size as Elanor.

Sandy: So I tie them up. I've got some rope in my backpack.

Joe: Raneth will stand guard. Questioning prisoners doesn't sound like something he'd be good at.

Mike: I'll help Elanor tie them up. Do I have to wait for the spell to wear off or something?

Chris: No, you can wake them with a slap or two, or throw some water on them.

Mike: I'm not wasting water. I wake one up with a slap to the face.

Chris: He wakes up, and begins chattering in an unfamiliar language. It's not the common language of humans, nor is it the language of halflings or of elves.

Mike: Hey, wait. Valdorian is pretty smart... does he know any other languages?

Chris: Good call, Mike. With your Intelligence bonus, you can start with one extra language besides Common and Elf. I'll tell you what... if you want, you can speak their language.

Mike: Sure, okay.

Chris: These monsters are goblins, and they are begging for mercy.

Mike: That's more like it. Valdorian asks them where the children are.

Chris: One goblin looks at you with fear in his eyes and says, "We gave them to the ogre. He told us he'd kill and eat us if we didn't get him some children to eat. Please don't kill us!"

Sandy: An ogre? What's that?

Chris: A humanoid monster, much bigger than a man, strong but not very smart. And usually pretty evil.

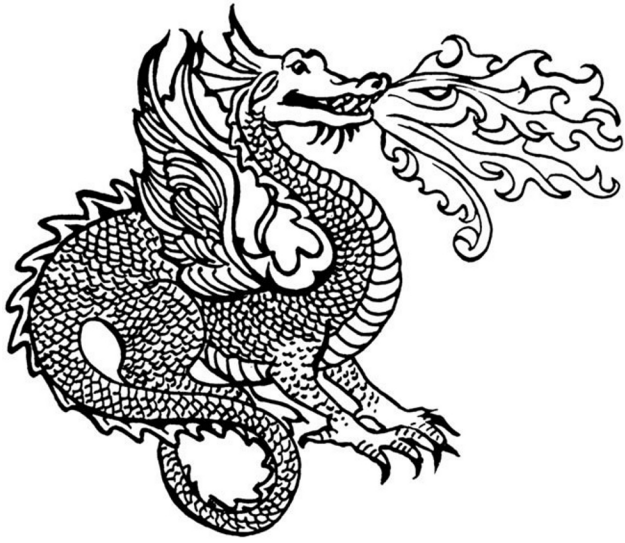
Sandy: Well, duh, he wants to eat children.

Mike: If he's a lot bigger than these guys, he'll kill us! I mean, Joe is down to his last hit point, and I've used my only spell...

Sandy: We don't have to kill him, Mike. We just have to trick him... remember, "not very smart?"

The Adventure Goes On

Hopefully this example of play has helped you see how role-playing games are played. In the next part I'm going to give you some tips on how to play the game better. I'm aiming my tips at beginners, but with any luck even more experienced players may learn something useful.



Part 2: Advice For New Players

The Basics

The first bit of advice I can give you is, have fun... this is, after all, a game.

Don't be afraid to ask the GM questions; but don't be surprised if he or she gives evasive answers. The GM will tell you what your character thinks he or she sees, hears, and so on.

But ask the questions anyway. Talk about what's going on, to the GM or to the other players. If you think your character might be about to be ambushed, it's probably a good idea to mention that your character is being especially alert.

Talk to the NPCs. Non-player characters are how the GM reveals information to you. With a good GM, your character may even develop a relationship with an NPC who might be helpful at some later date.

Try things. This isn't a computer game, where the things your character can do are limited. Unlike the computer, your GM has an imagination. Just because the numbers on your character sheet or the rules in the book don't say you can do something doesn't mean you can't. Ask. The GM probably won't say you can do something, but you should be able to guess from his or her reaction whether it might work. Expect the GM to make up some sort of die roll on the spot, and then think about your odds before you roll it.

Don't be a rules lawyer, arguing about every tiny detail of the rules. Do bring up any rule that might save your character's life, but don't argue about them. You may find it fun, but trust me, nobody else does.

Make some notes. Write down the names of NPCs who help you, and those who threaten you. It's hard to remember from one week to another who is who in the fictional world, but rest assured the GM knows. Make notes of rumors you hear and clues you find, even if you don't understand them.

Oh, and read your notes from time to time. What made no sense before may suddenly *click* into place on a later date.

Saving Throws

A **saving throw** is a die roll you must make in order for your character to avoid some bad result; saving throws (or "saves") are made to resist some magic spells, to resist or reduce the effects of poison or traps, and so on. Saving throws are one area where the exact details vary a lot from one game to another, so you should read the rulebook for details.

Mortality

Characters die. In Old School games, beginning characters have a particularly high mortality rate, and it's important you understand that from the start.

Don't invest a huge amount of effort in creating a detailed background for your first level character. A name and a one-line description will do it... "Moziah is an axe-wielding warrior from the hill country."

In modern games, there's a focus on creating complicated, detailed characters with a lot of options. This is actually kind of fun, but it takes time, and when you spend a lot of time creating a character it's a lot harder to see that character die. So modern games tend to make it harder to die... sometimes, it's just about impossible.

In the Old School, player characters don't begin as special snowflakes, all unique... they become that way by being played. The first character I played for any length of time was a human fighter, and to begin with, other than some decent ability rolls, he was hardly anything special. But as time moved on, he became that way. He did a service for the elves, and as a reward they gave him an uncommonly intelligent horse. He was fool enough to eat the heart of a strange creature that was half dragon, half basilisk, and upon surviving (he got one saving throw, at a penalty, and I was sweating bullets) he gained an extra measure of strength and an aura of power that awed ordinary people.

The point is, he didn't start out special. He earned it, and by extension, I earned it. It's a far more interesting story than anything I could have just sat down and written because it actually happened (in the fictional sense, anyway).

What's the difference, you ask? If I had brought him in with those features already, and I tried to read the background to the GM or the other players, they'd be like, yada yada. But the other players were there when we saved that elven village (and they all got something too) and they were there when he ate the monster's heart (and they were almost as interested as I was in the result of my saving throw).

The point is, expect death. If your characters can't die, what glory is there in surviving, much less thriving? Hang in there, learn to play sensibly (following at least some of the suggestions in this section may help), and when you get a character who survives to second level you'll know what I'm talking about.

Facing Monsters

The first rule of dealing with monsters (or any sort of foe or obstacle) in the game is to understand that you won't necessarily win every fight... and losing has a way of being fatal to your character.

Sometimes you need to run away.

Pay attention to your hit points, and to the condition of the other player characters as well. If you're not up to the fight, it's time to retreat.

Pay attention to your position. If the monsters can surround you, that's bad. It's more important to maneuver into a place where they can't do that than it is to attack them.

Use ranged weapons when you can, especially if you're facing monsters that don't have any. Any damage you do before they close with you is going to help you win.

Use your healing magic. Any character who can absorb a full healing spell or potion should have one. If you go into a fight short on hit points, but you "saved" healing magic for later, what

good will that do you when your character dies? Use it while you can.

Use healing spells before potions, because if the cleric dies with uncast spells, nobody will get anything from them. If the guy with healing potions dies, you may get to loot his backpack, and his potions will still be available.

At some point or another, you'll be low on hit points and out of healing magic. Unless you just can't, you should *go home*. Back to town, or camp, or wherever passes for a place of safety. Your characters need to rest and recover. The temptation of "just one more room" is powerful. Resist it.

Keep The Party Together

This is not just one thing, but two.

When exploring a dungeon, someone will eventually suggest splitting up "to cover more ground." Don't do it. Unless you are **sure** the dungeon doesn't contain any monsters (and what kind of dungeon is that?) it's not worth the risk. Half your party will surely end up meeting a group of monsters that would be a challenge for all of you, and that won't end well.

This isn't the same thing as having the thief scout ahead... in that case, the rest of the party waits or lags behind, keeping the way clear between themselves and the thief; at the first sign of trouble, the thief will retreat to the main group.

The second point is that, in a fight, you should not let the monsters pull you apart. Fighters shouldn't advance when the others can't follow, and the front line should try to avoid breaking up and allowing the monsters to pass through to the weaker back row characters.

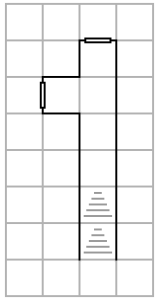
Mapping

Remember back in the previous section when Mike decided to draw a map of the dungeon? You should pretty much always do this. Mapping can be a bit of a chore, though, so let me show you the method we've used in our group for years.

First of all, the GM should tell the player who is mapping what scale the map should be in. This isn't revealing any secrets to the player, it's just making the game easier to enjoy. Most classic dungeon interiors are drawn at one square equals either five or ten feet.

Now for an example. I introduce the dungeon this way:

> This map is in ten foot squares, and it'll be easiest if you start in the middle of the nearest side of the paper. The stairs are ten feet wide and run down to the north twenty feet, then the corridor runs twenty, branch left ten feet to a door, run ten feet to a door.

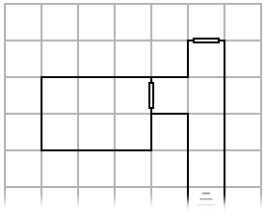


It sounds a little odd, but it's a very efficient way to describe a dungeon. Here's what the player would draw.

The player has just assumed north is at the top of the map, which is fine. The stairs "run" twenty feet, then the corridor "runs" another twenty. The next instruction is "branch left" which means that the corridor continues onward past the branch. Alternatives would be "crossroads" (the corridor goes four ways), "turns," or "tees" which means it goes left and right but not onwards. Branch, turn, tee, and crossroads always take a space of their own, just as shown.

The rest of the instructions finish out the map as shown. The players decide to try the door to the left, and after they get it open I say:

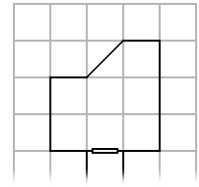
> This room is thirty feet deep and twenty feet wide and extends left.



Here's the result. "Extends left" tells the player how to lay the room out on the map.

How about a more complicated room? When the players open the other door, I say this:

> Start from the left side of the door and follow the wall. Run ten feet, turn right, run twenty feet, turn right, run ten feet, half turn left, diagonal one square, half turn right, run ten feet, turn right, run thirty feet and square it off.



Wow, that sounds complicated, but if you follow along step by step you get this strange room:

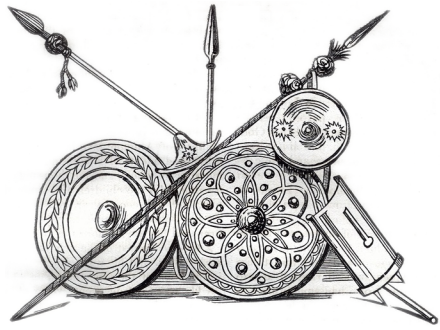
Mapping can be a chore, but if you do it my way, or spend some time working out your own system, it doesn't have to be so bad. Good maps make for good adventures.

Step Up

For those reading this book who plan to just be players, well, you might think you're pretty much done with it. The next sections are aimed at teaching beginning Game Masters the art of running adventures, and of creating them.

But even if you think you'll spend all your time as a player, you might want to keep reading. Knowing how the Game Master runs the game will help you to understand how to play it. It might even give you more respect for the amount of work it requires, and the kind of skill it takes to be good at it.

And who knows? Someday you might just find yourself becoming a Game Master after all.



Part 3: Running An Adventure

In this section I'll present a single dungeon level which you can use to start your own game. It will be presented in much the same way as standard Basic Fantasy RPG adventures such as **Morgansfort** or **The Chaotic Caves**, but unlike those adventures (which are written for moderately experienced Game Masters), it will also include guidance on how to run each room. This first dungeon level will include challenges directed at various character races and classes, so that when you run it for your own players they will have an opportunity to learn also.

> *In the adventure which follows, my comments and advice will be shown like this.*

It's best for the Game Master who is using a published adventure to read the entire adventure first, so that he or she will have a good grasp of what's going on.

The Abandoned Tower

An adventure for 3 to 5 beginning player characters.

In order to start the adventure, read (or paraphrase) the boxed text below to the players:

> The old tower has stood on the hill overlooking the river for longer than anyone remembers. There's not much left of the tower itself, but according to the old stories there's a dungeon underneath it. Some say a treasure lies buried there... but others say that monsters lair inside.

> *Boxed text in an adventure is usually meant to be read to the players. The Game Master should always read through the boxed text once before reading it to the players, in case there is something that he or she wants to change. This is especially true of introductory text like the paragraph above. The author of the adventure (often called a module) may have written it to fit into his or her own campaign world, and it may need some adjustment to fit into yours.*

Wandering Monsters

> *Wandering monsters, also known as **random encounters**, refer to monsters (or NPCs) met at random within the dungeon or wilderness area.*

An encounter check should be rolled every three turns. Roll 1d6; on a 1, roll 1d4 to choose among the monsters below, and again as given for the number appearing. The monsters below are limited in number, as shown; when the number listed have been met and defeated, no more of that sort will be encountered. Of course, those that flee may return again if indicated.

*Note that the encounter checks are to be made every three turns. (A **turn** is a unit of game time, generally ten minutes, used in many classic-style role-playing games.) Keeping track of game time doesn't have to be extremely accurate in most cases, even though the rules may make it sound that way. Assume that anything the player characters do takes at least a turn, if the duration isn't given in the rulebook, and keep a rough count. Or just make a roll any time it seems like the player characters have done quite a bit since last time you rolled a check.*

1. 1d4+1 Goblins (6 total)
AC 14, HD 1-1, #At 1 spear, Dam 1d6, Mv 20', Sv F1, Ml 7

HP		
3	□□□	3 □□□
5	□□□□□	5 □□□□□
2	□□	4 □□□□

> *Wow, that's a lot of stuff. Let's go over it:*
>
> *The first line gives the number of the encounter (remember, we're rolling 1d4 to choose), followed by the number of monsters (1d4+1, so we roll a four-sided die and add one to see how many appear), the kind of monsters (goblins in this case) and finally the maximum number that might appear randomly. Basically, besides the goblins that appear in the key below, there are at most six more of them wandering around.*

*The next two lines are the monster's **statblock**. These are the statistics that are relevant to fighting this monster. I won't get into a detailed discussion of how they all work – that's what the rulebook is for – but I will give you a brief rundown.*

***AC** is **armor class**, as discussed earlier.*

***HD** is **hit dice**, which for a monster in Basic Fantasy RPG as well as many other games is the number of dice rolled for the monster's **hit points**. In Basic Fantasy RPG, the number of hit dice is equal to the **attack bonus** for most monsters; if the **AB** is different for some reason, it will be listed in parentheses after the hit dice figure.*

***#At** is **number of attacks**. This is the number, and usually the type, of the attacks the monster can make in a single combat round. The goblins here are armed with spears, and can stab with them once per round.*

***Dam** is **damage**, or more generally damage per attack. These goblins do 1d6 points of damage with each successful attack.*

***Mv** is **movement**, that is, the distance the monster can move in a single combat round.*

***Sv** is **save as**. In Basic Fantasy RPG, monsters roll saving throws as if they were one of the standard character classes (usually fighters). These goblins save as if they were first level fighters, abbreviated F1.*

***Ml** is **morale**. This number indicates the likelihood that the monster will stand and fight, or run away. Generally morale is checked when the monsters are first encountered, and then again if the monsters suffer harm or if it appears they might lose the battle. Note that the GM does not have to use morale rolls, but may simply decide what the monsters do.*

*The last part of the listing above is the **hit points**. Basic Fantasy RPG adventures usually include checkboxes such as you see here for the convenience of the GM. Other games may just list the monster's hit points as numbers, in which case the GM will need a piece of scratch paper to keep track of them.*

So that's what all that means. For more information about the various statistics described above, please refer to the Basic Fantasy RPG Core Rules. Now, let's see the rest of the wandering monsters:

2. 1 Giant Crab Spider (1 total)
AC 13, HD 2*, #At 1 bite, Dam 1d8 + poison, Mv 40', Sv F2, Ml 7
HP 13 ☐☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐

This is a bit tougher monster. It has poison listed as a damage type, which means that any character bitten by the spider must save vs. Poison or die. But a more important issue, for the GM anyway, is that this is a monster that is really not equipped to open a door. So, if the giant crab spider is indicated on a wandering monster check, the GM must think about how it will be encountered.

If the next room the player characters enter is otherwise empty, obviously you can put the monster there. If the player characters leave doors open behind them, it could sneak up on them. To make things really interesting, if the next room they enter has a monster listed, the crab spider might be there, already doing battle with the regular inhabitants of the room. The point is, think about what is going on in the dungeon, and don't be afraid to be a little creative.

3. 1d4 Giant Fire Beetles (5 total)
AC 16, HD 1+2, #At 1, Dam 2d4, Mv 40', Sv F1, Ml 7
HP 7 ☐☐☐☐☐ ☐☐
7 ☐☐☐☐☐ ☐☐
5 ☐☐☐☐☐
5 ☐☐☐☐☐
4 ☐☐☐☐

Fire beetles have glowing organs that provide illumination even after the creature is dead, but the wandering monster entry doesn't mention that. This is one of the reasons why beginning GMs should read the monster descriptions from the rulebook before running an adventure.

As time goes on you'll learn these things, but even an expert GM may need to refer to the book from time to time. You'll

look more knowledgeable (and probably be more confident) if you've done the research before your players come to the table.

4. **1d6 Giant Rats** (8 total)
   AC 13, HD ½, #At 1 bite, Dam 1d3 + disease, Mv 40'
   Swim 20', Sv F1, Ml 8
   HP 2 ☐☐ 3 ☐☐☐
   3 ☐☐☐ 4 ☐☐☐☐
   2 ☐☐ 3 ☐☐☐
   3 ☐☐☐ 3 ☐☐☐

This monster lists "disease" as a possible effect of being hit. This is another case where the GM should review the monster's description in the rulebook... it's important to know what might happen, and to keep track of any characters who might be affected.

Dungeon Level 1 Key

The text below gives the number of each area (room) on the dungeon map, and describes what is found in each. In most Basic Fantasy RPG adventure modules, the dungeon maps are collected together at the end of the adventure, and so you will find the map for this dungeon in the following section. Other games may do it differently, of course.

1. STAIRCASE:

The tower is little more than a shell, but inside you can see that the rubble and brush has been cleared away from a staircase which descends into darkness.

The landing of this staircase has a concealed tripwire, really just a thread, which may trigger an alarm in area 2 below. The tripwire is very thin and hard to see, and so fragile and sensitive that it will not be noticed if it is tripped.

The chance to see the tripwire is 1 on 1d20, unless the character is actively looking out for it, in which case the chance is 1-2 on 1d6. Add 1 to the range if the character is a thief, and/or 1 if

the character is an elf (so the chance for an elf thief is 1-3 on 1d20 "at a glance" or 1-4 on 1d6 if actively looking for it).

If not noticed, the chance that any character passing through this space will trip it is 1-4 on 1d6. If tripped, the goblins in area 2 will be alerted and will not be surprised.

Note that this room prescribes a special method of detecting the tripwire which you will not find in the rulebook anywhere. Adventure modules often contain special rules for things like traps. Always remember that the GM may change the adventure in any way that he or she sees fit... if you don't like the rules given above, you are absolutely free to change them.

2. GOBLIN PARTY: The door to this room is not locked or stuck. In fact, it will appear to have been repaired recently, if anyone thinks to check.

Most doors in dungeon adventures are assumed to be stuck, requiring someone to force them in order to enter. This assumption may be changed in the introduction to the adventure or on a room-by-room basis (as above).

If the goblins were alerted by the tripwire in area 1, read or paraphrase the following:

> You see six monstrous little manlike creatures with pointed ears and sharp pointed noses, pointing sharp pointed spears at you.

If the goblins were **not** alerted by the tripwire:

> You see six monstrous little manlike creatures with pointed ears and sharp pointed noses, playing at some sort of dice game at the far end of the room.

The room description above doesn't mention rolling surprise checks, but you should do so for at least the player characters in any case. Most adventure modules don't include instructions about doing what you are supposed to do anyway, and instead only describe unusual situations (such as

the tripwire in area #1 preventing the goblins from being surprised). It's best to assume that all the "usual" procedures in your rulebook apply in a published adventure, unless you know for sure that they don't.

These goblins are a raiding party from a tribe that lives further into the forest. They are opportunistic, and will attack any non-goblins they think they can defeat; at the first sign that they might not win, they will attempt to retreat if possible.

5 Goblins: AC 14, HD 1-1, #At 1 spear, Dam 1d6, Mv 20', Sv F1, Ml 7

HP 4 ☐☐☐☐ 6 ☐☐☐☐☐ ☐
3 ☐☐☐ 5 ☐☐☐☐☐
6 ☐☐☐☐☐ ☐

Goblin Leader: AC 14, HD 2, #At 1 spear, Dam 1d6+1, Mv 20', Sv F2, Ml 7

HP 10 ☐☐☐☐☐ ☐☐☐☐☐

3. CHOICES:

The door to this room opens easily. When it is opened, roll 1d6. On a result of 1-2 one of the wandering monster groups (above) is just entering the room from the door from area 6. See the Wandering Monsters section to determine what is encountered.

This room is littered with bits and scraps of cloth and leather, all rather rotten looking. There are two doors in the far corner, one on each side; the one on the right has some sort of writing scrawled on it.

The writing is in an ancient language; a magic-user might be able to decipher it with an Intelligence roll. It says "Beware the unquiet dead." This is a reference to the skeletons in room 4, just beyond the door.

4. SKELETONS:

This room has no notes about the door being easy to open, so the GM should assume it needs to be forced.

A pile of bones topped by two human skulls lies in the far right-hand corner of this room. The room is otherwise empty, save for the dust on the floor and cobwebs on the walls and ceiling.

If the room is entered (past the 10' square alcove in front of the door):

The bonepile rattles, and then rises up into the form of two complete skeletons. They advance on you, their bony hands outstretched.

The skeletons are guarding the secret door in the corner, but of course there is no way for the adventurers to learn this. The skeletons will not leave this room, and if the adventurers retreat and close the door behind them, the skeletons will return to the corner and "lie down" again.

2 Skeletons: AC 13 (half damage from edged weapons, 1 point only from arrows, bolts, or sling stones), HD 1, #At 1, Dam 1d6, Mv 40', Sv F1, Ml 12

HP 6 ☐☐☐☐☐ ☐ 7 ☐☐☐☐☐ ☐☐

Note that skeletons, in Basic Fantasy RPG at least, have some added defensive features. Edged weapons are less effective against them, and arrows, bolts, and sling stones do just one point per hit. Not all encounters will necessarily be as well-detailed as the one above, so it's good to review the monsters in your rulebook before running the adventure. With experience, you'll learn these things and find you need the rulebook less often.

And don't forget that skeletons are undead monsters. This means that the cleric in the party may be able to Turn them. Normally you shouldn't give players advice, but since this is an introductory adventure, feel free to give that player a hint.

5. SECRET ROOM:

The door to this room is marked with an "S" symbol on the map, and that's all you're told about it. Most secret doors in published adventures don't include instructions in the text of the adventure about how they are opened. The rulebook will tell you how to determine when (or if) player characters find a secret door, but beyond that it's left up to you how they get it open.

Here's where a good default will help you out. Most dungeons have walls made of stone; secret doors are hidden by having the seam concealed in the gaps between the stones. A single stone might function as a pushbutton of sorts, freeing the door and allowing it to be opened. Whether the door closes itself or not if left unmonitored is of course up to you.

But as always, feel free to be creative!

Inside this small room you find a chest... but it's been smashed open. Coins litter the floor around the wrecked bits of chest.

Someone else has already looted this treasure, but they left behind the smaller denominations of money. A turn spent gathering the coins will yield 300 copper pieces and 200 silver pieces.

This is a pet peeve of mine, and yet I've perpetrated it many times myself... nice, even numbers of coins. What I do most of the time is deduct one from the hundreds place and roll d10's to fill in the remaining digits. This also reduces the amount of treasure being handed out. Some modules give rather a lot, so it's rarely a bad idea to reduce it some.

6. PIT TRAP:

The doors (both of them) leading from area 3 to this room are in good condition and open easily, but with a loud squeak. Roll 1d6 when the room is entered; on a 1, one of the wandering monster groups is entering this room from the staircase.

This large room appears to be empty. There is what appears to be a burnt-out torch against the right-hand wall, and a rivulet of water runs down that same wall, across the room and down the stairs ahead and to your left. There is also a door set in the back of an alcove at the right end of the far wall.

The pit trap has a 1-2 on 1d6 chance of being tripped if any character stands on or walks across it. Add one to the chance for each additional character who is on the trapdoor at the same time (so three characters on the trapdoor would result in a 1-4 on 1d6 chance of the trap opening). Anyone on the trapdoor when it opens must save vs. Death Ray (with any Dexterity bonus added to the die) or fall 10' to the bottom of the pit, taking 1d6 points of falling damage.

Anyone who makes the save will have jumped to safety at the last moment, and the GM must decide where on the map they end up. The pit closes and resets automatically after one turn.

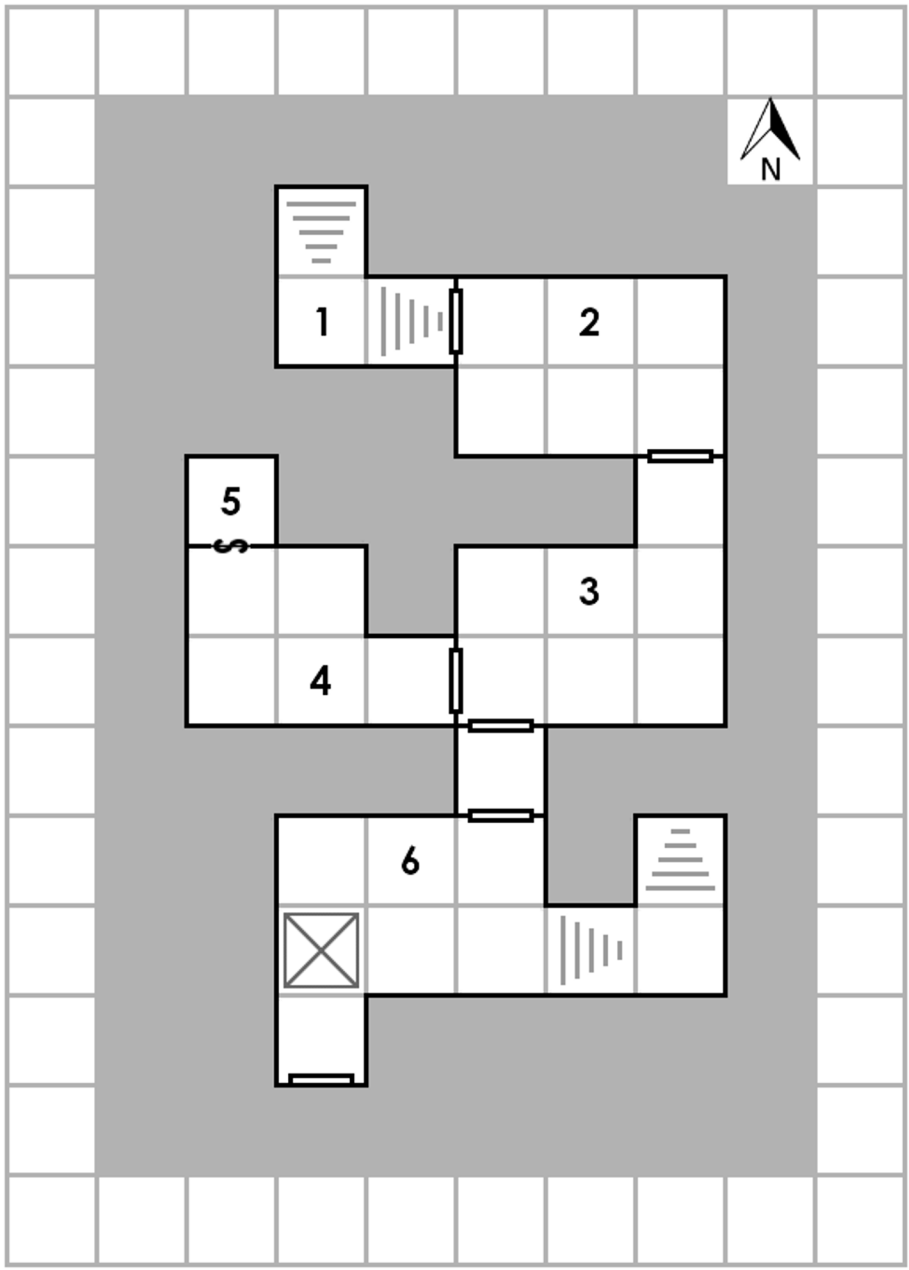
At the bottom of the pit lies the skeletal remains of some adventurer. He still wears a suit of **chainmail +1** and was armed with a normal dagger and a **shortsword +1**, and the contents of his beltpouch lie scattered on the floor: 18 GP and 5 PP.

> *Remember that the adventurers have no way of knowing whether any of the items they recover are magical, other than to cast **detect magic**. Even with that spell, the actual bonus value or power of the item is not revealed. Only tell the players what their characters could actually know. In the case of magical weapons and armor, using them is generally the only way to discover the bonus value (or penalty, if the item is cursed).*

The false door is bolted to the wall, and is of course a lure to tempt adventurers to their doom in the pit.

The staircase descends to the second dungeon level.

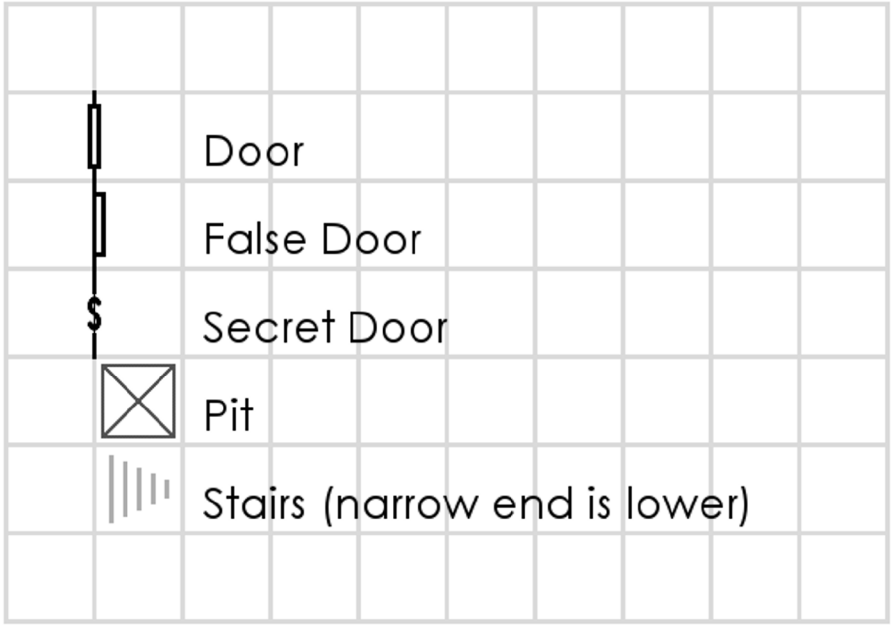
Level 1 Map



Scale: 1 square = 10 feet

Map Legend

The symbols shown below are all pretty traditional, having been in use since the late 1970's more or less unchanged. Modern maps may use different symbols, but with any luck they will include a key like this one.



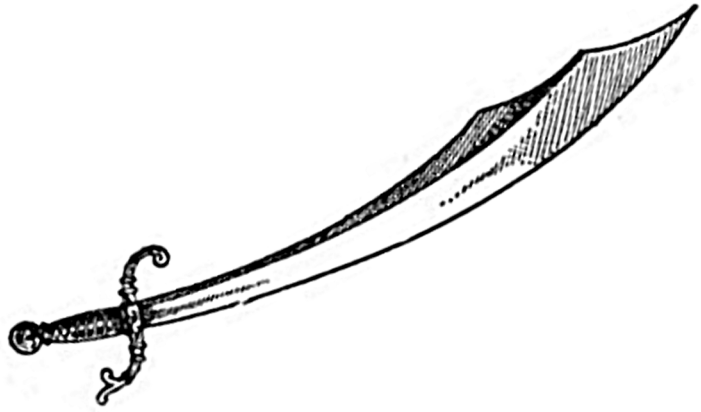
Moving On

So now you've seen a short but very ordinary dungeon adventure. You can absolutely use this adventure yourself. Hopefully my hints and tips will help you make your first time enjoyable.

The most important thing is, jump in! Round up some friends, and pass around this book if you like; or just do it like in part 1, if that works for you. You probably won't be a great Game Master right off, and that's fine. The important thing is to start getting experience, because the more you get, the better you'll be. There are more hints and tips in Part 5: Game Mastery, but honestly you'll benefit more from them after you run a game or two. They'll make more sense when you've seen for yourself how RPGs actually work.

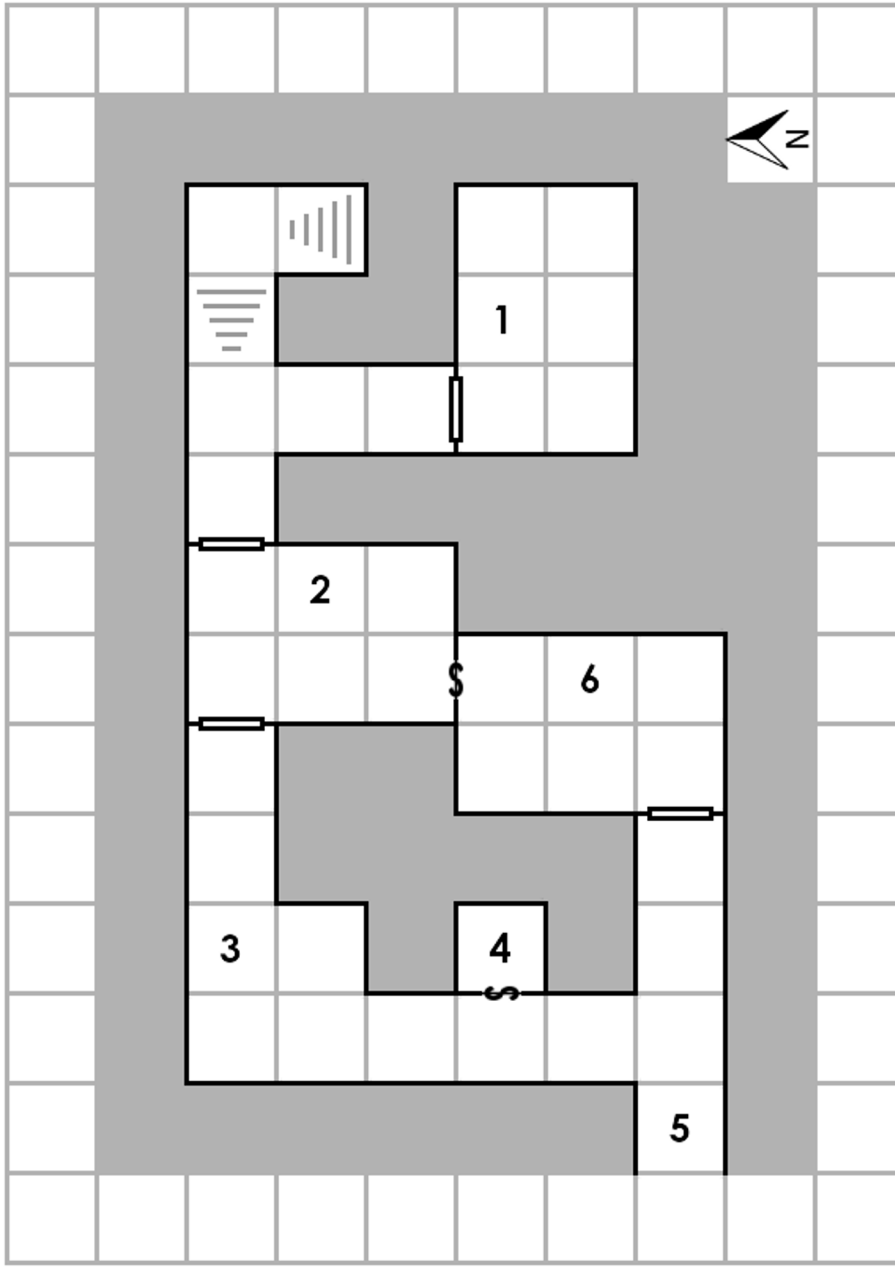
Later on (in Part 6: Other Games) I'll discuss using adventures written for other game systems with Basic Fantasy RPG, and vice versa. Adventures written for any "Old School" game are broadly compatible, and with a little effort applied before the players show up you should be able to use almost any of them with whatever game system you choose. But as I say, that discussion is for later.

After you run a few adventures, you may find yourself wanting to create one of your own. That's the topic of the next section, so whenever you're ready, turn the page and we'll get started!



Part 4: Creating An Adventure

In this section I'm going to show you how to design your own adventure. The first thing we need is a map:



This map was created using the MapMatic +2 software found at:

http://mapmatic.basicfantasy.org

But you don't have to use a program to create a map. For the adventures I create for my own players, I draw my maps on graph paper, which works just fine. I create my maps that way, and only computerize the ones I intend to publish.

Stocking the Dungeon

Filling in the room contents is referred to as **stocking** the dungeon. Basic Fantasy RPG provides a set of random tables for dungeon stocking (as do many games), and we're going to use them to "rough out" this dungeon.

But first, let's talk about the map. I've created it to represent the second level of the dungeon under the Abandoned Tower (the adventure presented in Part 3, above). Note that it is rotated (the arrow indicating north will tell you how) compared to the level 1 map.

Something intelligent should lair in room 6. Whoever has their lair there knows about the secret door, and can use it either to escape or to ambush characters in room 2. At area 5 is the end of a tunnel that leads to a cave mouth in the side of a bluff nearby, used as an entrance by the occupants of room 6 as well as a way for other monsters to get in and out of the dungeon.

Let's consider what the occupants of room 6 are. In traditional dungeons, each level down from the surface is harder than the one above it, and monsters are assigned to levels based on their toughness. This is something of an early attempt at game balance; first level characters would presumably know better than to enter the second level of the dungeon, for fear of being wiped out by the tougher monsters there.

This works fine for **megadungeons**, the huge underground complexes that were the "standard" for dungeons in the early days of the hobby. This dungeon, though, is pretty small; both levels together give just 12 numbered areas to explore. So

we're going to say that the whole dungeon is level one, for purposes of difficulty.

Looking through the rulebook, we see that there are just two intelligent races of monsters who might fill the bill. Since we have goblins already on the upper level, let's say that the inhabitants of room 6 are kobolds.

These little dogfaced humanoids are usually portrayed as diggers and as trapmakers, so we'll have some sort of trap or traps built by them on this level. In fact, let's just go ahead and blame them for the good condition of the traps on the upper level.

We'll also assume they know about the goblins, but being cowardly have chosen not to confront them. The goblins don't know about them at all, having not gone down the stairs.

Since, as I noted before, this is a small dungeon, let's further assume that the kobolds aren't a full lair but just a group scouting this dungeon as a possible home for their tribe. There are too many monsters in this dungeon to suit them, though, so they are holed up in room 6 while they try to decide what to do.

If they play their cards right, the adventurers might clear away all those other pesky monsters... and the kobolds might subsequently try to kill off the adventurers to keep the location of their new lair secret.

I don't know how that sounds to you, but I'm looking forward to running this adventure already. So let's dive in and get the rooms filled out.

Step 1: Random Generation

There are six rooms here, as I've said before, so let's roll six times on the table in the BFRPG Core Rules (on page 158 of the 3rd Edition rulebook). I roll percentiles six times and get the following results:

71 Monster with Treasure

89 Trap

44 Monster

06 Empty

87 Special

21 Monster

I've already decided I want a group of kobolds in room 6, so we'll make that the "Monster with Treasure" room. Area 5 is a corridor area where I figure I'll have an automatic encounter check (as was done in the first level) so that can be the Special.

An aside: A "special" room, sometimes called a "trick," is any room that isn't one of the other types. It's not properly empty, it's not *necessarily* a monster encounter, nor an unguarded treasure, nor a trap. Specials are among the hardest rooms for me personally to come up with, but they are also some of the most fun rooms.

With areas 5 and 6 taken care of, that leaves a Trap, two Monsters, and an Empty room. Room 1, off by itself, looks like a good place for a lair, so we'll put one of the monster encounters there. Areas 2 and 3 are in the path a character or monster would take between the stairs and the outside entrance, so I'd like to put the remaining Monster encounter in room 4. And this leaves a Trap and an Empty room; just randomly I decide to put the trap in room 3 and the empty room in area 2.

So now we need to actually put something in the dungeon. Let's do them in order.

Level 2 Key

> *For this part, I'm going to go back to this format for my commentary, so you can clearly separate the game materials from my explanation.*
>
> *Room 1 gets some kind of monster, I've decided. I'd like to have a monster that won't "interfere" with the other monsters in the dungeon, so I'll go with an undead encounter. In fact, let's go with zombies.*

Now if you look them up in the rulebook, you'll see that zombies are 2 hit dice. I'd like to keep this dungeon not too tough, since I'm teaching new players here; given that, I think the thing to do is to have two zombies in the room. I'm working under the assumption that I'll have 3 to 5 players with new characters, so that should be a fair challenge for them.

Here's the room:

1. ZOMBIES:

2 Zombies: AC 12, HD 2, #At 1 weapon, Dam 1d8, Mv 20', Sv F1, Ml 12

HP 9 □□□□□ □□□□
8 □□□□□ □□□

Notice I didn't include any boxed text. I'm writing this adventure for myself, so I'm not going to bother with that... I'll just make it up as I'm going along. I'm actually thinking that the zombies are lying in caskets; perhaps there are five or six caskets here, each with a body in it. When two of them rise up to attack, this may cause the players a moment or two of extra fear as they wonder if the others will rise up also.

2. EMPTY:

One thing that is not obvious is that empty rooms don't have to actually be empty. An "empty" room doesn't contain a monster, treasure, trap, or special. It can still contain puddles, cobwebs, furnishings, wall hangings, discarded and useless items, trash or rubble... you get the picture. Just to be random, I decide the room is empty except for a shallow puddle in the southeast corner and two half-rotten doors leaned up against the west wall.

3. TRAP:

So this room gets a trap. I pull out the 3rd Edition of the Basic Fantasy RPG Core Rules for inspiration; on page 159 there is a handy list of traps. Looking over the list, I decide to go with poison gas:

This room contains a poison gas trap. Each character who walks diagonally across the center of the floor has a 1-2 on 1d6 chance of stepping on the trigger stone; if this happens, the room fills quickly with a noxious gas, requiring a save vs. Poison each round a character is in the room. Failing the save results in 1d4 points of damage. Note that each round a character remains in the room requires another such save.

If you're reading along in the rulebook, you may notice that I didn't actually use the version of poison gas found there. I just used the list for inspiration, and created a less deadly but still dangerous trap for my dungeon.

4. SECRET ROOM:

At this point, I discover I've changed my mind. This room is supposed to contain a monster encounter, and I have another monster with treasure in room 6; instead of doing that, I'm going to place a monster with treasure in this room. The kobolds, clever little monsters that they are, have trapped a giant spider in this room to guard their treasure. I already have a giant crab spider in the encounter key, but there's no reason not to have another one here:

Giant Crab Spider: AC 13, HD 2*, #At 1 bite, Dam 1d8 + poison, Mv 40', Sv F2, Ml 7

HP 14 □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□

The treasure must be something the kobolds picked up along the way, since a small scouting group wouldn't be carrying a lair treasure. Let's assume they found an unguarded treasure; in fact, maybe they found it in this very room and chose not to move it. Or perhaps they trapped the giant spider in the room for their own safety. I may even decide something different when I run this adventure.

Unguarded treasures are described on page 131 of the Basic Fantasy RPG Core Rules 3rd Edition. Let's go through the rolls. A level 1 unguarded treasure has a 75% chance of including copper pieces; I roll 51, so there are 1d8 x 100 copper pieces. I roll an 8, so the total is 800 CP.

There is also a 50% chance of silver pieces being present. I roll a 16, so there are 1d6 x 100 of them here. Rolling 1d6, I discover there are 400 SP in this treasure hoard.

There is a 25% chance of electrum pieces; I roll 70, so there is no electrum in this hoard. Gold pieces are only 7% likely, and platinum is a scant 1%, and I roll 60 and 15 respectively, so there is no gold or platinum in this hoard. Gems are 7% likely, jewelry 3%, and rolls of 81 and 22 mean there is none of that either.

Finally, there is a 2% chance of a magic item. I roll 02... so there is a single magic item in this hoard.

Turning the page, I roll on the "Any" column of the first table. My roll is 97, which indicates a Miscellaneous Magic item. Rolling one more time on the table on page 134, I get a 29. The magic item indicated is a Brazier Commanding Fire Elementals.

Okay, wow. That's actually a very powerful magic item, probably far too powerful for first level characters. If I was dealing with a group of experienced players, I might just go ahead and use that item, just to see what they do. But this is an adventure for beginners... no, I'm not doing that. I roll again, getting 16 this time.

The magic item in this hoard is a pair of Boots of Levitation. An interesting item, and not one that I'm afraid will cause any sort of balance issues.

I could have skipped any or all of the above rolls and just put whatever I want into this dungeon. However, random rolls make things easier for me, and help me avoid developing any sort of pattern my players might notice. I'll talk more about that in Part 5: Game Mastery.

So we have 800 CP, 400 SP, and a pair of Boots of Levitation. Remember what I said earlier about using percentile dice to randomize the number of coins in a hoard. I roll two numbers, getting 21 and 100. I deduct 100 from the copper pieces, then add 21, getting 721 CP. Since I rolled 100 for the silver pieces, there are in fact 400 SP even in this hoard.

Let's have a little fun with this:

> In the middle of the floor of this room you see a pair of boots, surrounded by a pile of copper coins. The boots appear to be filled to the tops with silver coins.

Treasure: 721 CP, 400 SP, Boots of Levitation

Yeah, I said I wasn't writing boxed text, but I want to be sure to remember this bit. The giant spider is hanging from the ceiling, and should get an extra chance to surprise the player characters; maybe 1-3 on 1d6, instead of the standard chance of 1-2 on 1d6 (as given on page 43 of the 3rd Edition Core Rules). The rules there say I could give 1-4 on 1d6, but the monster isn't exactly hidden so I'm splitting the difference.

5. CROSSING:

I'm making this area much like room 6 on the first level:

The tunnel leading off the map to the west runs another 120' to a cave opening in the side of a bluff. The cave mouth is well hidden from the outside by brush and vines, but many creatures use it to enter this dungeon.

Roll 1d6 when this area is entered; on a 1, one of the wandering monster groups is entering this room from the tunnel.

6. KOBOLDS:

This area is pretty easy. I'm just going to place a group of kobolds here, with a leader who's a bit tougher than the run-of-the-mill kobolds.

Kobolds appear in pretty large groups... 4d4 individuals, according to the entry on page 99 of the 3rd Edition Core Rules. Rolling, I get 12 total. The rules say that one in every six individuals will be a leader type, so two of these are leaders. I was thinking one, but let's go with it.

First, the ten ordinary kobolds:

10 Kobolds: AC 13, HD ½, #At 1 dagger, Dam 1d4, Mv 20', Sv NM, Ml 7 (6)

Before I roll up hit points, let's talk about a few things here. The Core Rules say that kobolds have 1d4 hit points, but I've written ½ next to their hit dice. This is a common way to mark such creatures (there are a handful of them). The rules say "1 weapon" for number of attacks, and give 1d4 for damage, so I'm going to say they are armed with daggers. Finally, the rules say that kobolds led by a leader-type get +1 to their morale, so I've indicated that above, with the original morale in parentheses.

Now let's have some hit points:

HP 2 ☐☐ 2 ☐☐
4 ☐☐☐☐ 3 ☐☐☐
4 ☐☐☐☐ 4 ☐☐☐☐
1 ☐ 4 ☐☐☐☐
3 ☐☐☐ 3 ☐☐☐

Now for the leader types. The rules say they have a full hit die, but are apparently the same otherwise as the regular kobolds. I'm going to assume they're at least a bit stronger and arm them with shortswords. Morale must be 7, since it would be weird for the leaders to be more cowardly than their followers.

2 Kobold Leaders: AC 13, HD 1, #At 1 shortsword, Dam 1d6, Mv 20', Sv NM, Ml 7

HP 5 ☐☐☐☐☐ 7 ☐☐☐☐☐ ☐☐

And that completes the dungeon. Or does it? One thing I haven't done is to define a wandering monsters table for this level.

Since I've decided that both levels of this dungeon are going to be "dungeon level 1," I could just choose to use the same wandering monsters table as was given for level 1. But that's not very many monsters... the table may run out before the adventurers finish exploring.

Here's my compromise. I'm going to add two encounters to the table from level 1. Now, when the adventurers are on either level and an encounter is rolled, I'll use my expanded list.

Let's start with some kobolds who may have wandered away from the main group:

5. 1d6+1 Kobolds (8 total)
AC 13, HD ½, #At 1 dagger, Dam 1d4, Mv 20', Sv NM, Ml 6

HP	2	□□	4	□□□□
	1	□	2	□□
	2	□□	2	□□
	1	□	2	□□

Finally, we'll add something that might have wandered in from outside. Looking at the sample wandering monster tables in the 3rd Edition Core Rules, I notice that giant bees are an option. Let's throw some of them into our list:

6. 1d6 Giant Bees (8 total)
AC 13, HD ½, #At 1 sting, Dam 1d4 + poison, Mv 10' Fly 50', Sv F1, Ml 9

HP	2	□□	2	□□
	1	□	2	□□
	3	□□□	3	□□□
	3	□□□	4	□□□□

Now this adventure is well and truly done, and it's time to call my players together and get something started. Hopefully this has inspired you to do the same.



Part 5: Game Mastery

The goal of this book is to make it easier to get into a role-playing game, and I believe the best way to do that is to help more people become good Game Masters. In this section I'm going to give you some advice on how to do just that. But before I do that, I need to finally explain what "Old School" means.

Yeah, it's about time.

The most important thing about the Old School is this:

Rule Zero

The Game Master is always right.

That's how it's usually said, though there are some variations. What it means is that the game you're playing is totally under the control of the Game Master. Whatever he or she says happens, well, that's what happens, even if it disagrees with the rules... and the Game Master can change the rules at any time.

Wow, that sounds incredibly bad, you might be thinking. *Who would want that?*

Remember, the Game Master's job isn't to kill your characters, or "win" somehow by beating up on you, but to *make the game fun for everyone*. So a good Game Master won't lord it over you, showing off his or her imaginary "power" at every turn, changing the rules like some mad god in some dark mythology.

Well, bad GMs might do some or all of that, a fact I think might explain the rise of the New School. In the New School, the rules are of primary importance, and the Game Master's job is to execute the "program" they define, based on the input from the players, as if the GM were a computer. The rules specifically include things that the GM should not do, such as pitting the player characters against opponents with whom they aren't well matched.

This sounds better to a lot of people, and if you're one of those people, hey, go for it. There are lots of "New School" games

available, and much of what you've learned in this book will help you play those games too. But I'm an unabashed believer in the Old School, and I'm going to do my best to help you understand why.

One of the consequences of the New School is that modern games are much more detailed, having a rule for everything. Old School games depend in large part on rulings by the GM. Who was in range of that Fireball? What do I have to roll to jump across that pit? The GM in an Old School game considers the situation and makes a ruling, while the New School GM picks up the rulebook and looks for the appropriate rule. This usually means the rulebook must be consulted more often, since with more detailed rules it's much harder to remember them all.

The main advantage of the New School is this: It's harder to be a truly bad Game Master. Without the ability to freely make any ruling you want (an ability often called **GM Fiat**), it's harder to screw up the game. On the other hand, though, I believe a really good GM, one who knows how to make the game fun, is seriously hampered by the New School restrictions.

I personally think that being a New School GM is less fun. In most New School games, the high level of detail in the rules means it takes much longer to create characters or monsters. A GM creating an adventure must build many opponents, only to see most of them killed off in the adventure; the GM will then need to put the same work in for the next adventure, while the players add an ability or two to their character sheets and move on. As long as you use published adventures, of course, you don't need to put out that effort... but then you never get the fun of creating your own.

You've already seen how easy it is to create adventures for Basic Fantasy RPG. Other Old School games are very similar; in fact, it's not hard to translate materials between **OSR** (Old School Renaissance) game systems, a subject I'll get into a bit later in the book.

The advice I'll be presenting below is directed at new Game Masters of Old School games; it may be that some of it will be relevant to New School GMs as well.

Just A Little Terminology

An **adventure** is a single dungeon, or wilderness area, or any other coherent set of opponents and/or challenges. An adventure may take one or more **sessions** to get through, depending of course on how long you and your friends choose to play each time you get together. Several related adventures may be called a **campaign**, but that word also refers to a series of adventures run by a single group, even if the adventures aren't necessarily related. Sometimes a series of related adventures is called an **adventure series**, which is a lot less ambiguous. Finally, a fictional world in which one or more groups of adventurers play out various adventures is called a **campaign world**.

So for example, the Basic Fantasy multimodule **BF1 Morgansfort** presents a **campaign world** called the Western Lands and an **adventure series** set in that world. The three adventures, *The Olde Island Fortress, The Nameless Dungeon,* and *Cave of the Unknown* are related geographically (all three are described as being relatively near the home base area called Morgansfort).

Keep It Simple

As a beginning GM, you won't yet have a sense of how things are supposed to work. Whatever game you choose to run, keep your early games simple. Don't let your players beg or wheedle you into allowing every rules supplement that sounds fun to them. Don't succumb to the urge to modify a bunch of stuff. Trust me on this... the vanilla game can keep you and your players entertained for quite a while.

Don't Build Railroads

One of the things that we try to avoid in the Old School is writing a story. It's an easy trap to fall into... you envision a grand villain, and you see in your head the story of how the player characters will defeat him. You might not even know what player characters will be playing in the adventure, but it doesn't matter to you... it's a great story, and you're sure your players will enjoy it.

It's the model used in most single-player computer RPGs, so it will be familiar to many people these days. You go through this scene, and get a clue or a key or something to lead you to the next scene, and again something leads you onward to another scene. Eventually you get to the villain, typically just as he or she or it or they are about to enact some horrible plan.

We often call this a **railroad**, and building one is rarely a good idea. What if, after playing out the first scene, the player characters completely overlook the clue? Now, to keep the adventure "on track" you have to basically hand it to them; so you send in an NPC to say "wait a minute, guys, you missed this!"

Or what if, having found the clue, they totally misinterpret it. The strange hammer they found was supposed to lead them to the dwarven mines, but they thought it was a shipbuilder's tool and headed for the coast. So again, you send in an NPC to redirect them, because they got derailed.

See why we call it a railroad?

Or what if, having figured out who the villain is, they decide to *join forces with him.* Or maybe they just decide to ignore him. So much for being heroes. Is it even possible to get this story back on the rails?

And then there's that thing that happens sometimes. You have a whole trail of clues that will lead step-by-step to the discovery of the bad guy's plan, or his weakness, or whatever... and after getting just one clue, one of your players figures out the whole thing and the party skips all your other clues and scenes and goes *straight to the bad guy and vanquishes him.*

All that work you put in creating the adventure goes poof.

It's especially important not to abuse the power of the GM Fiat to force the adventure back on track. Your players probably aren't stupid, and they will resent being pushed or herded.

The important thing is, don't write a story. In the Old School, story is what happens when our players pick up their dice and walk into our worlds. Go ahead and create NPCs with grand plans, but try very hard not to have any grand plans of your

own. It's way more fun for you if the NPCs plans are spoiled than if yours are.

Be A Little Random

Many Game Masters will tell you of the importance of having a good "dungeon ecology." The idea is that your dungeon and all the monsters in it should make sense, based on the location of the dungeon and the way in which it was built and populated. Randomly stocking the dungeon, the way we did in Part 4, is a no-no to these GMs.

I'm here to tell you that the real world often seems pretty random. I recall an old school building where the third floor rest rooms were like handball courts, a few toilets lined up along one wall, sinks on another, and a bunch of empty space. I think they were converted classrooms. In another building, a staircase goes up to a blank wall where a doorway was closed off some time in the past.

The point is, life is messy. Plans get changed, items get repurposed. Sometimes you end up with some pretty weird neighbors.

Well, the true believer in dungeon ecology would say, *then you need to think about that too. When you design a dungeon, think about all the different creatures that lived there and how they would have changed or expanded the dungeon.*

Consider this: Any dungeon design of this sort, put together with all that deep thinking (which is hidden from the players, of course) will look pretty random in the end. So go with the flow. Roll up your rooms randomly, and then go through the design with your map in front of you and think about what parts are pure nonsense. Don't sweat every detail, but do try to avoid sticking full-grown dragons into 10' square rooms. Rearrange the rooms (as I did in Part 4) to suit your needs. If a room rolled randomly just doesn't work, throw it out and create a new version, randomly or not as it suits you.

Sometimes you'll start with an idea for part of a dungeon, and that's great. You don't have to roll *every* room randomly. Let

the dice be your servants, not your master. You can still use them to fill in the rooms you don't have a plan for.

There's another good reason to use random rolls to create at least part of your dungeon design, and I'll talk about that next.

Try Not To Develop A Pattern

Adventure writing is like any other form of writing in many ways. For instance, every writer has a style, and with experience you can recognize it. Style shows not only in the words the author chooses, but also in the concepts and philosophies he or she promotes.

Really, there's nothing wrong with having a style, but it's important to avoid letting your style make you too predictable, especially if it's an adventure you're writing.

I don't know how many times, in discussions held in person or online, that a GM has said "I don't use monster X because I don't like it." Sometimes it's a game mechanical thing, sometimes it's more a factor of the monster's imaginary ecology or role or backstory.

So the GM whose existence we are imagining creates a new adventure for his or her group of regular players. They all know their GM's style well, naturally. In the course of the adventure, an NPC hints at the presence of a vampire (for instance) and all the players think, *nah, our GM doesn't like vampires*, and they don't even take it seriously.

I've also heard many GMs say that they never use adventure modules. That's too bad, really, because using an adventure module written by another author is one of the easiest ways to avoid or break your patterns. Oh, sure, you may still go through and change some things you really don't like, but the overall adventure will still be in the author's style instead of in yours.

Another, harder, way is to create NPCs who hold beliefs that disagree with yours, and then don't let them be just cardboard cutouts. Do some reading. Read things written by people you don't agree with, and remember that, in any reasonably large

and expansive fantasy world, there should be at least a few people (or dragons, or whatever) who believe just like that.

Stretch a bit. Use the monsters you usually don't like, or which for some reason you've just omitted. I hardly ever use giants, a weakness I'm trying to overcome. It's not that I dislike giants, I just never think of them when I'm choosing monsters. So recently I ran some of J.D. Neal's *Saga of the Giants* adventures as a way to overcome that weak point and surprise my players.

The point is, don't let yourself fall into a rut. Breaking your patterns will help keep your game fresh for your players and for you as well.

Scene Building Shorthand

I'm a proponent of the "fast and loose" method of campaign world development. The more you write down, the more things you create that your players will never see or appreciate. Look at the classics of Swords & Sorcery fiction… they use a variety of shortcuts to make the world seem real, or at least interesting, without actually providing (or needing) a lot of deep background material.

It's not Swords & Sorcery, but here's one of my favorite examples: "The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed."

You just read that, and now you can see it in your mind's eye. I don't know if the two men named (I'm 95% certain you imagined the gunslinger as a man) are on horseback in your imagination like they are in mine, but you can see the desert, and the man in black, and the gunslinger dressed in tan clothing rather like Marshal Dillon or Clint Eastwood. If you don't imagine it exactly as I do, I bet you still have a vivid image.

If you don't recognize it, that's the first line of the first Dark Tower book by Steven King, titled "The Gunslinger."

You don't need a deep description of the world to make it seem real (and interesting) to the players. Don't be afraid of stereotypes… they are the shorthand of the imagination. You can set a scene very quickly by using stereotypical descriptions,

then as the scene unfolds, the players will realize those were just their first impressions. Stereotypes are only bad, story-wise, when they trap you. When you let each and every character be *only* a stereotype, with no depth at all.

The same things that work with characters work with worlds. If an NPC swears "by the seven swords of Saviare" you know there's a story there; it doesn't have to be heavily detailed, but it can lead to an adventure if you play it right. (It worked quite well for me.)

The secret is not to show everything, or tell everything. Keeping some mystery in your storytelling is important. And if you're going to do that, don't bother writing down in detail 1,000 or 2,000 or 10,000 years of your campaign world's history. You won't remember it all, and if you do, you'll likely never have an opportunity for your players to appreciate it. Keep it short, just notes to remind you of the main parts.

After all, people in the real world don't really know history nearly as well as they'd like to think. Why should it be different in the campaign world? So you, in the guise of an NPC, tell the players about the defeat of the great clan of Senarius, and later another NPC tells a contradictory story. Even if it is, in fact, you who have remembered wrong or otherwise screwed up, why worry about it? Make it part of your world.

Using Miniatures

You can play role-playing games just fine without the use of any board or playing pieces. I did it that way for years. But there are many advantages to the use of miniature figures.

There are two main ways to use miniatures. First, you can use a **battlemat** or other gridded mat or board. The second way is to use a blank surface (such as a table) and a ruler.

With a battlemat and a set of wet erase markers, I can lay out a room in which a battle is about to happen or some other interesting event is likely. I instruct my players to place their figures on the mat, using the squares at some scale (generally 1 square equals 5 feet, though I've used 10' squares on occasion)

and when the encounter happens I place my monster figures in the appropriate place on the mat. The squares make it easy to figure out movement, so as we count through the Initiative numbers, each player moves his or her figure as desired.

Using a blank surface and a ruler is really much the same thing. Generally you will define scale distances of 1" equals 5 or 10 feet, much the same as with a battlemat. Using the battlemat makes it easier to draw out dungeon rooms (using the gridlines as a guide) but there is really little difference otherwise.

If you choose to use a battlemat, you will notice that diagonal movement can't just count squares. A square is about 1.4 times as wide diagonally as the length of a side. I suggest you count every second diagonal step as being two steps; this would give an average distance of 1.5 squares per diagonal step, which I think is plenty close enough for a game.

Miniatures are handy for other purposes as well. For example, when the adventurers enter the dungeon, you will probably need them to declare their marching order (so you can tell who steps into a trap first, or who is targeted first by monsters attacking from front or rear). Without figures, you have to write it down; with figures, the players can just line them up and you can see at a glance what their marching order is.

Miniatures can become expensive. (For some, they are almost an addiction.) If you have limited cash available, please note that cardboard standup figures are available for purchase, or even as free downloads which you print yourself.

Some monster encounters are hard, or possibly even impossible, to play out on the battlemat. Consider as an example an insect swarm, or a flock of bats. Don't feel that, because you and your players have miniatures, you *have* to use them for any particular monster encounter.

Part 6: Other Games

So far this book has described role-playing games using examples from the Basic Fantasy RPG. But BFRPG is hardly the only RPG system in the world... there are many, many others you could choose from.

Basic Fantasy RPG is a "class-and-level" game system; each character has a class which defines the sorts of things he or she can do or not do, and a level of experience which determines how well. There are quite a lot of these game systems, but there are also many that use other methods of resolution.

The "opposite" (if that word means anything) of a class-and-level game is a "skills based" game. In those games, each player chooses (in some way or another) skills his or her character knows how to do – fight, cast spells, ride horses, make armor, and so on – and assigns some rank or chance of success. Thus, it's entirely possible to create a character who is really good at fighting but can also sneak around, or one who knows how to work magic and train animals, or whatever else the player can think of. Those who are fans of such games will tell you they are superior; personally, to me "superior" means "more fun" and thus is entirely a matter of taste.

There are also games which straddle the line, granting skills as a result of gaining levels, or allowing players to choose to add skills instead of gaining levels, or even both.

Note that the "Old vs. New School" discussion crosses over these types of games; there are certainly examples of all types of games in each School.

Assuming you choose to play an Old School class-and-level game, you still have many options. Most of these games are called **retro-clones** because they mimic one or another of the classic games from the early days of RPGs. Besides Basic Fantasy RPG, I'm going to discuss three other very good options in the sections below, and talk a little bit about using adventures designed for any of them in any of the others.

OSRIC™

OSRIC, the Old School Reference & Index Compilation™, is a game system which mimics the "advanced" rules from the 1970's and 1980's. It's well known and fairly popular, and is one of the oldest retro-clone game systems.

Labyrinth Lord™

Labyrinth Lord by Goblinoid Games is a game system which mimics the 1981 "basic" version of the world's most popular RPG. Goblinoid Games also offers the Advanced Edition Companion, which when used with Labyrinth Lord gives an "advanced" game experience.

Swords & Wizardry™

Swords & Wizardry by Mythmere Games is actually three games: the Core Rules, which mimics the 1974 version of the world's most popular RPG, with the most popular supplement; the Complete Rules, which incorporates all the early supplementary rules; and the Whitebox Rules, which mimics just the very first three book version of that same game. S&W is the least detailed, indeed "vaguest" (according to the official website) set of rules in this group, but this vagueness is actually considered an advantage. The GM is not just free, but indeed encouraged to interpret a great many rules as he or she sees fit.

Which Should I Choose?

Well, that's a tough question, but here's the good news: All of the games discussed here, including Basic Fantasy RPG, are available for free as PDF documents on the publishers' respective websites:

basicfantasy.org

www.knights-n-knaves.com/osric

goblinoidgames.com

mythmeregames.com

So go download them, give them a read, and see which one appeals to you most. But read on for more information that might help you decide.

Converting Game Materials

All four games discussed here are actually very compatible, especially at lower levels. There are a few details you'll need to know if you want to use adventures written for one in another.

Probably the first thing you'll notice is that each game approaches Armor Class differently. Recall that, in Basic Fantasy RPG, AC starts at 11 for an unarmored man and goes up from there. This is called an **ascending AC** system. In Labyrinth Lord, the game that is most similar to BFRPG otherwise, AC starts at 9 for an unarmored man and goes down from there. This is called a **descending AC** system.

OSRIC uses a descending AC system which is *almost* just like Labyrinth Lord. It gives an unarmored man an AC of 10 and descends from there. If you use an adventure written for either in the other rule system, you just use the AC the way it's written *unless* you're dealing with an unarmored character.

Swords & Wizardry uses both systems. Armor Class is given using a descending system which starts at 9 for unarmored and goes down, just like Labyrinth Lord, and also using ascending numbers which start at 10 for unarmored and go up... *almost* but not quite exactly like Basic Fantasy RPG, which starts unarmored characters at AC 11.

Sounds confusing, I know, but it's actually pretty easy to switch between them in play. If converting descending AC to ascending (any descending AC to Basic Fantasy RPG AC), deduct the AC from 20. If converting Basic Fantasy AC to descending (for any of the other games), deduct it from 20 (it works in both directions). To convert ascending AC between BFRPG and Swords & Wizardry, deduct 1 point for BFRPG to S&W or add 1 point going from S&W to BFRPG.

You can almost always tell how to do it by looking at the three "classic" armor types, leather, chain mail, and plate mail. Take a look at this table:

Armor Type	Descending	BFRPG	S&W Asc.
Leather Armor	7	13	12
Chain Mail	5	15	14
Plate Mail	3	17	16

This tells the whole story. The descending column gives the numbers for Labyrinth Lord, OSRIC, and Swords & Wizardry (the last in descending format). The BFRPG column gives the AC in the ascending format for Basic Fantasy RPG, and the S&W Asc. column gives the same for Swords & Wizardry. In almost all retro-clones, the armor classes of these three armor types will be equivalent, so you can use them to figure out the conversion for yourself.

Movement

Unfortunately, all four games represent movement differently; yet all four can be readily converted, as I will explain below.

Recall that Basic Fantasy RPG movement rates are given in a per-round fashion; unarmored characters move 40 feet per round. In Labyrinth Lord, movement is given in feet per turn, and then in parentheses in feet per round. In that game, an unarmored character moves 120' (40'). Note that the per-round movement rate is the same for both games. If converting from BFRPG to Labyrinth Lord, the GM should simply multiply the BFRPG movement rate by 3 to get the per-turn rate for Labyrinth Lord. Obviously, converting from Labyrinth Lord to BFRPG is trivial, since the number you need is right there in parentheses.

OSRIC presents movement as a number of feet per round. However, OSRIC rounds are longer than rounds in either of the other two games. An unarmored character in OSRIC has a movement rate of 120' per round, which rather conveniently is the same as the per-turn rate in Labyrinth Lord. Simply divide this number by 3 to get the per-round rate for either BFRPG or Labyrinth Lord.

Swords & Wizardry presents movement as a number of scale inches. Unarmored characters have a movement rate of 12 scale inches per turn, which translates to 120' indoors at the indoor scale rate of 1" equals 10 feet. Note, once again, the equivalence... the per-turn rate in S&W is equivalent (at least indoors) to the per-turn rate in Labyrinth Lord. So to convert Swords & Wizardry movement rates to Labyrinth Lord, just multiply the given number by 10 feet, and to convert to Basic Fantasy RPG, multiply by 10 and then divide by 3.

Here's a handy chart to illustrate the relationship:

Basic Fantasy	**Labyrinth Lord**	**OSRIC**	**S&W**
80'	240' (80')	240'	24
60'	180' (60')	180'	18
40'	120' (40')	120'	12
30'	90' (30')	90'	9
20'	60' (20')	60'	6
10'	30' (10')	30'	3

Morale

Basic Fantasy RPG and Labyrinth Lord use almost identical morale rolls on 2d6; you can use the morale number from either game with the other pretty freely.

OSRIC employs a percentile morale roll. The table following can be used to select an appropriate conversion between the 2d6 and percentile morale systems:

2d6	Percent	2d6	Percent
2	3	8	72
3	8	9	83
4	17	10	92
5	28	11	97
6	42	12	100
7	58		

When converting from OSRIC to either of the 2d6 games, read down the percent column until you get to the first number that is equal to or higher than the OSRIC percentage, then read across to the 2d6 number. Going in the other direction is a bit more obvious.

Swords & Wizardry has a morale system very different from either of the preceding systems; when converting to Swords & Wizardry from another system, the GM will have to decide for him- or herself whether to apply the other system's morale or not. When converting to another game from S&W, the GM must make up the morale however he or she sees fit. I suggest reviewing similar monsters in the other game's rulebook and assigning a similar morale figure.

Alignment

The alignment of a character or creature is a general description of its beliefs. The very earliest RPGs used a simple alignment system of Lawful, Neutral, or Chaotic; both Labyrinth Lord and Swords & Wizardry use similar systems. More advanced games added a second axis, Good, Neutral, or Evil, which combines with the first axis to create nine distinct alignments such as Lawful Good or Chaotic Neutral. OSRIC uses a version of this system. Basic Fantasy RPG does not use any alignment system, though there are alignment supplements available on the basicfantasy.org website.

When converting monsters between these systems, the GM should consider monsters with similar outlooks in his or her chosen rules and assign the same alignment to the converted monster. Of course, if converting to Basic Fantasy RPG, you can simply ignore whatever alignment is already assigned.

Other Statistics

Amazingly, most of the other statistics are roughly equivalent for all three games. In general, you should look up named spells, monsters, and magic items you find in an adventure in your chosen game's rulebook and verify that they are actually equivalent. Where you don't find equivalence, you'll have to make adjustments.

Afterword

Well, you've made it to the end. If you haven't already, grab a copy of whichever game has caught your fancy, round up some friends and jump in!

All the games I've talked about have vibrant communities of fans in various parts of the Internet; if they have any sense, they'll be happy to see you. I know if you join us on the Basic Fantasy RPG forums you'll be made welcome.

If you aren't able to put together a group of friends to play, consider joining a play-by-post or chat game online. A play-by-post game tends to move slower, since the GM must wait for all players to check in before resolving actions (and the players must wait for the GM to do it) but if you're very busy a play-by-post might be just what you need to get your feet wet.

Chat games are much more immediate, obviously, and many of them use online "tabletop" sites which provide a virtual battlemat and figures. You need a reliable Internet connection to play a chat game, naturally. Some chat games are text chat where you type what you want to say, while others use shared audio so you can talk to the GM and the other players.

Whatever you choose, it's my sincere hope that this book has helped you prepare. But now, it's time. Get in the game, and good luck!



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