

How to get started with OSR

One Anon's tips, taking /osrg/ feedback into account. Version 1.00, 2024-10-11.

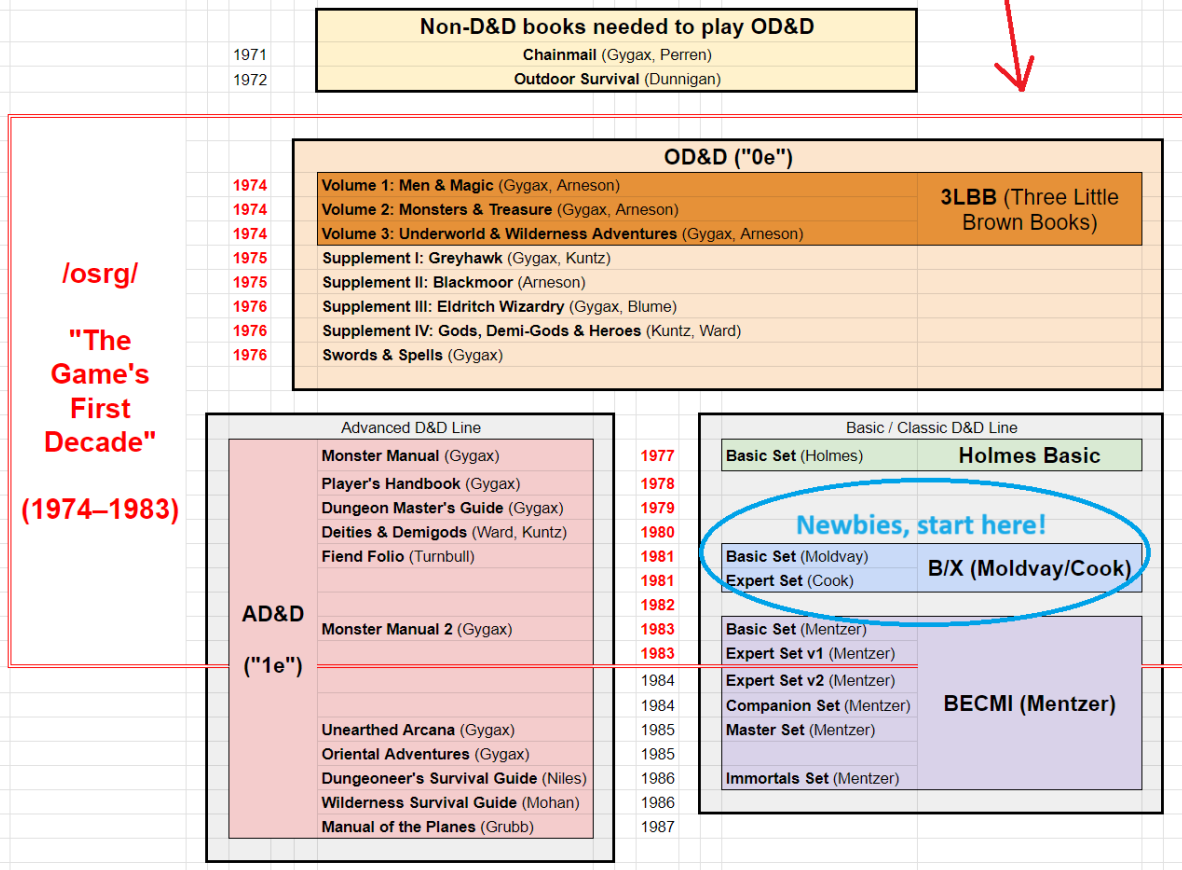
What the fuck's an OSR?

♥ □ /osrg/ — Old School Renaissance General Anonymous 05/07/24(Tue)09:28:29 No.92724887 >>92725304 >>92728093

Welcome to the Old School Renaissance General, the thread dedicated to the first decade of TSR-era D&D, derived systems, and compatible content.

Broadly, OSR games encourage a tonal and mechanical fidelity to Dungeons & Dragons as played in the game's first decade—less emphasis on linear adventures and overarching meta-plots and a greater emphasis on player agency.

If you are new to the OSR, welcome! Ask us whatever you're curious about: we'll be happy to help you get started.



How do I start? What system should I use?

OD&D, AD&D, and B/X are highly compatible and you can think of them as being **the same system** with some variation in specific bits. It's usually best to start with B/X: AD&D can be a tough nut to crack, and the OD&D rules are partially incomplete and rather poorly written — but there's some guidance for those later in this document.

1. Start by reading **B/X** (Moldvay's Basic and Cook's Expert) and learn by playing, keeping all of the following guidelines in mind.
2. **OSE-Classic** is a handy and faithful reference manual for B/X, but the examples of play in B/X are very much worth reading. So learn on B/X and use OSE-Classic as a reference manual.
3. Familiarise yourself with the **defining procedures** listed below.
4. **Play!**

Restrict your diet. You don't need to read any other retroclones. Stay away from all the noise that the NuSR coffee table ultralite crap makes. Distrust many "OSR" YouTube influencers.

What are the defining procedures of OSR?

Don't take oft-touted OSR primers too seriously, they are misleading. I recommend you focus on learning the procedures instead, learning them early, and learning them right: The OSR style of play **emerges** naturally from applying the procedures correctly. There are fine DM'ing skills to learn, and they will come with time.

- **XP for gold** and defeating monsters, but mostly for gold. No other sources of XP.
- Track session time by the hour and minute:
 - **Time tracking** in the dungeon and in the wilderness.
 - **Encumbrance** and exploration movement speed.
 - **Resource expenditure**. Track them fucking torches.
 - Check for **Wandering monsters** as needed, and remember to do it even when the party enters a room if it's time to check for one. A double Room+Wandering monster encounter is often amazeballs.
- Learn to handle **encounters** with monsters and traps by the book:
 - Make **surprise checks**.
 - Determine **encounter distance** based on dungeon/wilderness terrain and surprise.
 - Make **reaction checks**.
 - Learn to run the **pursuit** procedure.
 - When combat starts, **side initiative** is your friend.
 - Make **morale checks**.
- **Dungeons** are perilous places.
 - Some, many, most, or even all **doors are stuck** for the PCs — but not for the monsters!
 - Players must **map** after the DM's verbal descriptions.
 - There is no "my character would remember". Sure he would but **D&D tests the player**, not the character.
- Learn how to run **traps and secrets**.
 - Learn the subtle art of **telegraphing** the presence of traps and secrets by being neither too subtle nor too overt. This takes time to master.
 - Room traps are **triggered 2-in-6** when stepped upon, check for each member of the party individually.
 - **Secret rolls are** made secretly, but most of the other rolls are best made openly.
- The **Wilderness** is not as dangerous as they say, and it can be a very interesting place to explore.
 - Make **lost checks**. Implement **hunting** and **foraging** by the book.
 - Know that wilderness **evasion** procedures are very lenient so, against common bad advice, even low-level characters can adventure in small groups in the wilderness, with a little bit of caution and luck.
- Rules for **Hirelings, Henchmen (also known as Retainers), and Followers** are not decorative. Enable and encourage players to use help. Warn them that the game is designed under the hypothesis that the party will have Hirelings and Henchmen in their service. **Hirelings don't normally follow the party into dungeons, though!**

Don'ts and dos

- Don't write story plots and character arcs. **Create a world** (procedurally, if necessary), **stories emerge** from the interaction between the characters and the world.
- No or minimal **character backstories**. All new characters share the desire to become rich and powerful. The **XP-for-gold** rule is all the drive PCs need as motivation for joining an adventuring party. Don't make a backstory that's more interesting than the adventure to follow.
- No **character customisation** options, or very minimal ones at the most. Players should not invest a significant part of their energy and expectations on character customisation. Focus instead on offering players **real freedom** when it comes to sandbox play.
- You don't need to offer **quests**, and if you do, players don't need to take them. Embrace player initiative. Allow them to go wherever they want, whenever they want. **Even if it's outside the map you have drawn. Even if they are ignoring the dungeon you designed, bought, or pirated.**
- Don't balance encounters based on party strength. It's not the DM's job to make sure that the players have favourable odds to win. Monsters are balanced (very roughly) by dungeon level and by terrain. **It's the players' job to figure out what they can kill, where, when, and how.**
- Don't waste your time trying to shitbrew a game you've never even tried. Gygax and Arneson created a game that was made to be played. Most of **what is there is there for a good reason**, and you won't be able to tell until you try.

Anonymous 05/13/24(Mon)17:46:21 No.92779744 >>92779766

[>>92779645](#)

ok, I'm reading through the basic 81' PDF and wow.

I never knew DnD could be this good? There isn't a ton of slog and it reads like a real adventure with a purpose. My mind is blown.

Anonymous 05/13/24(Mon)17:49:05 No.92779766

[>>92779744](#)

Crazy, ain't it?

When the book isn't 80% player build options and the game is actually meant to be played at the table and not during character creation.

Anonymous 05/13/24(Mon)17:49:32 No.92779769

[>>92779645](#)

Same guy here scanning pages, I'm literally about to cry. DnD was like this? I thought it was always min/max stat grinding crunchy 2 hour combat phases. It's.... it's.... beautiful.

Play like the big boys: Advanced ways to run Basic D&D

Here are some cool and interesting ideas from AD&D that you can include in your B/X game now or later to make it feel even more different from all that WotC crap.

- Consider allowing players to run **multiple PCs**, even from the first session.
- Learn to run **combat with many monsters** quickly and efficiently. Consider a quick, dirty, and brutal figure ratio approach to mass combat (PHB 39).
- Modules are overrated. During the very earliest part of the Golden Age, the idea that DMs might want to buy commercial modules was not even considered. Embrace **low prep** as well as **procedural no-prep** play.
 - Consider implementing the **% in lair** checks from the MM.
 - As well as the checks for wandering monsters in the Wilderness actually being **Patrols** and **Fortresses** (DMG 182).

- Your primary sources for procedural play are **Appendix A** and **Appendix B**. Your secondary sources are Wilderlands of High Fantasy and Wilderness Hexplore. (Yes, even if you run a B/X game.)
- Watch all of **GFC'S DND** videos on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@gfcsdnd205/videos>
- Consider running **cities** as if they were a dungeon or a wilderness, tracking time and checking for city encounters (DMG 191)
- **"YOU CAN NOT HAVE A MEANINGFUL CAMPAIGN IF STRICT TIME RECORDS ARE NOT KEPT."**
(Gygax)

Many today think this quote refers to tracking time in the dungeon, something Gygax thought should go without saying at the time; It's rather about **tracking time when no table play is happening**. *O tempora, o mores*.

Consider encouraging **returning to the base camp** at the end of each session as well as a form of **1:1 time** between sessions (DMG 37--38). Using it, combined with players running multiple PCs, has some deep and interesting effects on a campaign. If you do, consider adopting:

- The **training** rules (DMG 86);
- The full week of forced **bedrest** after returning from 0 HP rule (DMG 82);
- Checks for **diseases and parasites** (DMG 13--14).

Last but not least, the DMG is required reading eventually because it's the best RPG manual ever written, based on many years of extensive DM'ing, and most of the problems you will encounter are addressed there.

FAQ

Can I start with AD&D instead?

Sure! It won't be as easy as starting with B/X, but you can definitely make it. **OSRIC** can be a very useful resource to get started with AD&D, but it's neither complete nor always 100% faithful. See the retroclones section below.

Can I start with OD&D instead?

You can try, but expect hard work and confusion. The the rules are often opaque or incomplete — sometimes intentionally, which is a draw for some. There's two main decisions you'll have to take: Whether to use the full OD&D suite or just the 3LBB, and what combat rules to adopt. The "alternative" combat rules are based on the d20 hit roll that everybody recognises as the D&D standard since at least 1977. The Chainmail ones feature three really rather different rulesets for mass combat, man-to-man engagements, and fights involving fantasy monsters, all based on the d6. Recommended resources: **Compleat Chainmail** and **Greyharp**.

What about the post-1983 AD&D books?

Some of the AD&D books in the front image are outside of the "first decade" box. The earlier ones have some usable things in them, but they get progressively worse and forgettable. You won't get shouted at if you use them, but you will come across as a bit slow if you use some of the things in them.

Be aware that "AD&D" 2e is not the AD&D we are talking about here. 2e is not an OSR edition and it is not recommended because it does not support or even outright breaks many of the defining procedures of OSR, and the advice given to DMs and players follows the Hickman Manifesto, that was written in opposition to the Gygaxian style of play that the OSR aims to recreate.

What's the deal with BECMI?

There are two versions of Mentzer's Expert book straddling the "first decade" box in the cover picture.

Mentzer's **Basic/Expert v1**, sometimes referred to as **B/E**, is very similar to B/X. The main differences are that the THACO, saves, and spell progressions were smoothed out a bit, whether that's good is a matter of personal preference (this Anon personally likes and uses those), but the examples of play and DM advice are worse than in B/X, which is why B/X is recommended over B/E to learn the game.

Mentzer was given the task to extend B/X to level 36 and beyond with Immortality, and the results in **Expert v2** and **CMI** were very mixed. Some things are arguably okay (very simplified domain rules, higher level spells, druids, possibly paladins), some doubtful (the mass combat rules, some of the fighter combat options), others are bad and were probably never playtested (the infamous nerfing of the Thief, weapon mastery, unarmed combat), others yet are not even D&D (pretty much the whole Immortal Set).

What are the most faithful OSR retroclones?

You don't strictly need retroclones to play, the original TSR books are perfectly viable, but the more faithful ones can be useful as reference manuals or to clarify some of the more obscure rules.

OSE-Classic (2017) is a **true B/X retroclone**. It contains all the rules minus the examples of play, modulo some rule interpretations that are almost universally accepted. Its SRD is freely available. Do notice that **OSE-Advanced** (2020) is not a retroclone of either B/X or AD&D, and is not the edition of OSE that is being recommended here. **Pro:** Excellent reference manual. **Con:** Poor way to learn the game.

OSRIC (2006, 2013) is the retroclone that kicked off the OSR movement. It is a **partial** reimplementation and clarification of **AD&D**. It has its own interpretations (house rules?) for some of the more obscure parts of AD&D, for example initiative, based largely on how AD&D was played at conventions and reports from people who played with Gygax himself. **Omissions:** Huge swathes of the original material were left out, including but not limited to Weaponless combat, weapon length, weapon speed, weapon vs. AC, diseases, parasites, poison research and manufacture, spying rules, training rules, bards, monks, psionics, astral travel and encounters, ethereal travel and encounters, wilderness generation procedures, construction and siege, aerial combat, naval combat, wilderness evasion, magical research, spell learning and acquisition, the procedures for getting lost. **Pro:** Easier to get into than AD&D. **Con:** Many omissions, some of which are arguably essential for OSR play, such as evasion and getting lost. The **errata and edition differences** commentary at <https://garysentus.blogspot.com/2022/05/osric-errata-unofficial.html> could be useful.

Greyharp (2011) is the text of the **3LBB** reformatted and reorganised in a single document, incorporating the FAQ from The Strategic Review. It's missing a few bits, like some parts of the encounter tables, so you'll still want the original at hand. It doesn't contain the full Chainmail combat rules, for which you'll need **Compleat Chainmail** (2010), which restates the rules of **Chainmail** as a coherent whole, including the changes required to use it with **OD&D**.

An individual analysis of **other retroclones** is out of the scope of this guide, but generally speaking they are neither as faithful as OSE-Classic is to B/X nor particularly good entry points to AD&D and OD&D. Some of the changes some retroclones make are okay or even good, some are bad, and others still ruin the game outright from the OSR point of view. Tread with caution.

How do I do mass combat?

Five main options: **Chainmail** (1971) for its historical value, **Swords & Spells** (1976) if you are kinky, **brutal scaling** of units (1:10 or 1:20) as hinted at in AD&D (PHB page 39), Dan "Delta" Collins' **Book of War** (2011) for something obsessively playtested and designed to correctly simulate the official D&D combat rules in the large numbers limit, and **ACKS** (2012) as part of its domain rules.

What about domain play?

Domain play can be started from the very early levels. A dozen mercenaries and a palisade on a hill are very affordable already for second level characters. Unfortunately, the rules for domain play were never fleshed out completely in any of the OSR editions. You should start by reading the relevant sections in the **DMG** (Hirelings, Henchmen, Followers, Construction, Siege, Territory Development by Player Characters) and familiarise yourself with the mass combat rules mentioned above. Good compatible OSR-adjacent sources include the domain economics rules in the BECMI **Companion** and **ACKS**.

Feedback and thanks

Thanks to every Anon who's given constructive feedback. I'll be sticking around for further comments.

If you have found this useful, do drop me a line on /osrg/, it'll make my day.