

OLD-SCHOOL ESSENTIALS

RETRO ADVENTURE GAME

Author's Notes on the Rules

v1.1

Old-School Essentials is the product of over two years of poring over venerable tomes, discussing rules minutiae with the elite of online RPG geeks, laborious writing, and painstaking layout work.

The result—the book that you hold in your hands—is a game 100% compatible with the classic Basic/Expert rules from 1981. However, even the hallowed Basic/Expert rules are not perfect and *Old-School Essentials* attempts to fix some of their most irksome errors.

This document—aimed at those with a passion for rules archaeology—describes the tweaks that I made.

The changes that I have made can be categorised into three groups, as follows.

Ambiguities and Omissions

The original Basic/Expert rules are not devoid of ambiguities: some rules are incomplete, some rules are described in a way that could be interpreted in multiple different ways, and some rules even contain contradictions.

With the aim of increasing the playability of the game, I decided to iron out such ambiguities in the rules. In doing so, I was careful to cleave as closely as possible to what I interpreted as the intent of the original rules. Other interpretations of the rules—and other resolutions of the areas of contradiction—are certainly possible, though.

Note that I did not attempt to elaborate upon vague or ambiguous spell descriptions, magic item powers, or monster abilities. Vagaries in such areas are a cherished feature of the Basic/Expert rules and each referee must make their own rulings as required.

Expansions of Scope

I expanded the scope of a small number of rules, applying them to more general situations than are explicitly allowed by the original rules.

Additional Optional Rules

I decided (after much soul-searching!) to include two additional rules options to the game, both aimed at speeding up combat: ascending Armour Class and resolving attack rolls using THAC0.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL NOTES

CORE RULES

Ambiguities and Omissions

Ability Checks

The original rules are somewhat ambiguous on whether ability checks are an optional rule or not. The original Basic rules do not specify ability checks as an optional rule. In the original Expert rules, ability checks are specified as an optional rule, but are recommended for use in climbing. On balance, I decided against specifying ability checks as optional. Their application is, of course, entirely up to the referee.

Encumbrance

The original Basic rules contain ambiguities relating to the encumbrance system. I have attempted to resolve these ambiguities in a sensible and consistent way, but other interpretations of the original rules are possible.

Retainers

The original Basic rules stipulate that retainers only receive half the experience points due to them. There are two possible interpretations of this. It may be that retainers' XP is entirely dependent on how much treasure they receive (1 XP per gp), but that there is an unspoken assumption that retainers receive a half share of treasure. It may, alternatively, mean that retainers only receive half of the XP that is due to them. The actual intention of the Basic rules is unclear; I chose to favour the latter interpretation.

Traps

The original Basic rules distinguish between room traps and treasure traps, but the relevance of this distinction to the abilities of adventurers to find traps is implicit. In my opinion, the rules presented in *Old-School Essentials* are the clearest way to resolve the ambiguity between the general adventurer ability to find traps (i.e. room traps) and the traditional thief class' ability to find small traps (i.e. treasure traps). The clarification presented is far from the only possible resolution, though.

Movement in Combat

The original Basic rules do not make it clear whether characters may run in combat (using the rules for evasion and pursuit in the dungeon). However, a later edition of the game makes it clear that this is not possible, so I have followed that clarification in *Old-School Essentials*.

Morale

The original rules are ambiguous as to whether a morale check is triggered the first time a member of the monsters' side in combat is killed or whether a check is triggered the first time a member of either side is killed. I have clarified this to what I feel is the most sensible interpretation: monsters check morale the first time one of their own number is killed.

Treasure Type Average Values

According to my re-calculation of these averages, there were errors in the original Basic rules. The average value for treasure type M, in particular, was way off.

Expansions of Scope

Adventures

While not a rule per se, it is worth noting that I have not followed the original Basic book's definition of the term "adventure" (the word was defined as a single session in which the game is played). This definition of the word is so unusual nowadays that I felt continuing to use it would only confuse, rather than elucidate.

Subduing

The rule for subduing is mentioned in the original rules in the context of dragons. I chose to place this rule in the combat section, as it could easily apply to other types of creatures (including humanoids).

THACO

This term was not present in the original rules, but was introduced as a convenient way of indicating which row of the attack matrix a monster or character class uses.

Types of Magic

In the original rules, the two types of spells are simply described as "cleric spells" and "magic-user and elf spells". In order to expand the scope to potentially include other character classes, I use the terms "divine magic" and "arcane magic".

Vehicles

The rules listed in this section originally applied only to water vessels. I have broadened their scope to encompass all types of vehicles.

Additional Optional Rules

Ascending Armour Class

The optional rule for ascending Armour Class is not present in the original Basic/Expert rules. The reason for integrating this option into the core rules is as follows:

- ▶ Use of ascending AC is probably the most common house rule applied by modern players to the classic Basic/Expert rules framework. (The second most common probably being separating character race and class, in the vein of the traditional Advanced rules.)
- ▶ Armour Class is a fundamental game mechanic and, as such, is referred to throughout the game (for example, in equipment lists, many spells, all monster descriptions, etc.). Applying house rules to such core mechanics of the game is awkward, entailing either the significant adaptation effort of all materials in use or an on-the-fly conversion whenever the mechanic comes up. Neither is trivial. (In contrast, for example, optional rules for creating characters with separate race and class can be easily addressed in a rules supplement, without affecting the core rules of the game.)

On balance, I felt it was better to include ascending AC as an option for those groups that prefer to use it. Groups that prefer the traditional AC mechanic may simply ignore the optional rule for AAC.

Attack Rolls Using THACO

The optional rule for resolving attack rolls using THACO is not present in the original Basic/Expert rules. It was added as it provides a more streamlined way of handling combat, removing the need to refer to the attack matrix.

CLASSES, EQUIPMENT, DOMAINS

Ambiguities and Omissions

Dwarf and Halfling Saving Throws

The saving throw values listed in the Basic rules are different from those listed in the Expert rules. I chose to favour the Expert saving throws.

Halfling Language

The original Basic rules include a halfling tongue in the list of languages that characters may learn, but do not specify whether halfling adventurers speak this language. I chose to make the obvious clarification that halfling characters do speak this language, in the same way that dwarf and elf adventurers speak their racial languages.

Fighter Extra Attacks at High Levels

The suggestions for high-level play in the original Expert rules are ambiguous about the level at which fighters gain extra attacks per round.

Magical Research

The original rules are not clear on whether spell casters of any level may perform research into miscellaneous effects. I chose to specify that clerics, magic-users, and elves can perform such research at any level.

Weight of Weapons

The weights of the following weapons are not specified in the original Basic/Expert rules and have been extrapolated from similar items: javelin, lance, sling, staff.

Weapon Combat Stats

The range of the javelin is not specified in the original Expert rules and has been extrapolated from similar items.

Slow Weapons Losing Initiative

The Expert rules note this rule as optional, where the Basic rules do not. I chose to favour the Basic rules, in this case.

Water Vessels

The exact capabilities of the different types of ships in the original Expert rules are somewhat contradictory. The details presented in *Old-School Essentials* resolve these contradictions in one possible way, while sticking as closely to the original rules as possible.

Unseaworthy Vessels

The draft of canoes and rafts were not defined in the traditional Expert rules. The listed values are extrapolated from similar vessels.

Mercenaries

The original rules are unclear about what type of horses mounted mercenaries ride.

Specialists

The wages of assistant armourers are not defined in the original Expert rules. The listed value is extrapolated from similar specialists.

Strongholds and Domains

The original Expert rules for calculating the cost of towers are highly ambiguous.

Expansions of Scope

Land Vehicles

AC and hull point ratings are listed for carts and wagons. These were not specified in the original Expert rules.

Turning Undead

The original rules specify turning purely by type of monster. The turning table in *Old-School Essentials* has been expanded to cover all undead, by HD, for the sake of modularity.

SPELLS

Ambiguities and Omissions

Detect Invisible

I added a description of this notoriously absent spell, drawing the details from a later edition of the game.

MONSTERS

Ambiguities and Omissions

Bull Shark

The original rules state that bull sharks use a ram attack to stun prey, but do not give mechanics for it. The rule in *Old-School Essentials* is derived from a later edition of the game.

Dervish

The suggested equipment is adapted from the 1979 Advanced rules.

Giant Bass

In the original Expert rules, the giant bass is only mentioned within the description of the nixie monster. In *Old-School Essentials*, I have adapted it to a full monster, referring to a later edition of the game for the descriptive details.

Ochre Jelly

The description of the ochre jelly in the original Basic rules is ambiguous on several points. I have attempted to resolve these ambiguities in a sensible and consistent way, based on the mechanics used for similar monsters, but other interpretations of the original monster are possible.

Rust Monster

The original rules are unclear whether rust monsters are immune to mundane damage. Following a later edition of the game, I decided they are not immune.

Sea Dragon

The sleeping percentage is extrapolated from dragons of like HD.

Sea Snake

The original rules do not specify the effects of sea snakes' poison. This has been clarified to be death one turn after the poison's effects are noticed.

Special Ability Asterisks

In the original rules, there are a small number of monsters with offensive special abilities but without an asterisk after their HD rating. As these monsters gained an asterisk in a later edition of the game, this appears to have been an error in the Basic/Expert rules. I have followed this later correction in *Old-School Essentials*. The following monsters are affected: giant centipede, djinni, dragon turtle, sea dragon, giant rockfish, yellow mould.

TREASURES

Ambiguities and Omissions

Gauntlets of Ogre Power

The description of this item in the original Basic rules is somewhat ambiguous. It's not clear that the bonuses only apply to melee attacks. The listed unarmed attack damage also contradicts what is listed in the Expert rules.

Potion of Growth

The original Basic rules do not note by how much the character's STR increases and are not explicit that only damage of melee attacks is increased.

Staff of Wizardry

The exact nature of this staff's whirlwind power is not clear in the original Expert rules. I have specified a duration of 3 rounds, based on the pillar of flame effect of the efreeti monster.

Sword +1, Light

The original rules are unclear whether the sword can be commanded to produce light or to cast the *light* spell. I have followed the former interpretation.

Warhammer +3, Dwarven Thrower

The range of this weapon is not specified in the original Expert rules and was taken from a later edition of the game.

THACO / Ascending AC

3 Attack Resolution Methods

The default rule for resolving attacks in *Old-School Essentials* is to look up the result of the roll in the attack matrix provided in the rules. This indicates the Armour Class that the attack hits. If the hit AC is better or equal to the opponent's AC, then the attack inflicts damage.

Two additional, optional methods for resolving attacks are also presented:

► **THACO:** Instead of referring to the attack matrix, the attacker's THACO score is used to calculate the Armour Class that the attack hits.

► **Ascending AC:** Instead of an AC system where lower scores are better (the default system—"descending AC"), the AC system is inverted, so that higher scores are better ("ascending AC" / AAC). When using ascending AC, the modified attack roll directly indicates the Armour Class that the attack hits, with no need to refer to the attack matrix.

Slightly Different Attack Chances

In describing the two optional methods for resolving attacks, *Old-School Essentials* notes: "Using Ascending Armour Class / THACO results in very slightly different attack probabilities than when using the traditional approach of descending AC with an attack matrix."

The reason for this very slight difference is that at its extremes, the attack matrix has repeating 20s and 2s which are not mimicked by using either of the optional rules for resolving attack rolls.

An Example

A normal human (THACO 20 / attack bonus -1) lucky enough to be in possession of a sword +3 attacks a monster with AC -1 / AAC 20.

Using the Attack Matrix

The character uses the attack matrix row for THACO 20. Hitting AC -1 requires an unmodified attack roll of 20, according to the attack matrix. With a +3 bonus to attack, the character therefore needs *a roll of 17 or higher*.

Using THACO Directly

The character's THACO is 20. The required attack roll to hit a monster with AC -1 is thus 21 (20 minus -1). With a +3 bonus to attack, the character thus needs *a roll of 18 or higher*.

Using Ascending AC

The character's total attack bonus is +2 (a basic attack bonus of -1, plus the +3 bonus from the magic sword). The character thus needs *a roll of 18 or higher* to hit a monster with AC 20.

See the Slight Difference?

Using the attack matrix, a 17 is required to hit. Using THACO or AAC, an 18 is required. This difference between attack resolution only manifests at the extremes of combat. The example used reflects this: a character with very poor combat ability and a big magical attack bonus attacking an opponent with a very good AC. This difference rarely arises in non-contrived cases, but is nonetheless an occasional possibility.