The Home-brewer's Pantry

A catalogue of rules for Dungeons
and Dragons in the wargaming style

Simon Carryer

Introduction

I would wager that anyone who has played Dungeons and Dragons more than once has thought about how they would change the rules to better suit their tastes.

"Hacking" the rules has been part of the game since its first days, and my belief is that the published game texts from those times are simply snapshots of what those authors were doing at their tables at the moment of writing. The game's rules do not live in published texts, but in the behaviours that are practiced at tables all around the world, every day. They are living things, constantly shifting and evolving in response to the needs of the people playing the game.

This has always been the case, and I believe that it's not just an inevitable fact, it's one of the game's strengths. Hacking the rules to better suit the agenda of your table is part of what makes the game enduring, eternally fascinating and relevant. As a group's understanding and experience grows, the rules can grow with you, reflecting ever-more arcane and bespoke concerns until the edifice crumbles, the rules are thrown out, and a new group forms with fresh, simple rules and the opportunity for developing a new understanding of the game.

The explosion of published rules sets over the last ten years or so has been of immense benefit to the community in this endeavour. Reading other people's understanding of the game, incorporating what works, rejecting or improving what doesn't, we forge better tools for our purposes. We can also look back on earlier texts with new understanding, and find new insights from the earliest practitioners of the hobby.

What I've tried to do in this text is pull out some of the common approaches and interesting ideas I've found in a broad selection of games from several eras of play. I've put them into rough categories and given some discussion of the ideas and what makes them interesting. I've tried to understand the problems these rules were created to solve, and given some discussion of how they do so.

Example games given for each of the rules listed are not intended to be the first, best, or most notable example of a game using that rule. They're just examples. Furthermore, the examples are not exhaustive. I haven't listed every appropriate game against every rule. Finally, there are many fantastic games which are not listed here. No attempt has been made at a complete survey.

My hope is that this will be a useful text in the eternal (and doomed) quest for the perfect D&D. There is of course no substitute for reading the games themselves, and I've given a bibliography at the end of this document. I encourage you to find and read these and any other games you can get your hands on.

This text is destined to be an eternal work in progress, forever out of date and incomplete. Games are published faster than I can read them. In this hobby everyone is a designer, and everyone is a fan. I hope that the next edition I publish will include something from your game.

   - Simon Carryer

Simulation

The core of the game. The players' characters explore a world that is simulated in the mind of the DM. The fundamental act of the game is the player interacting with the world through the lens of their character, and the DM judging the likely outcome of those interactions based on their unclouded vision of that fictional world and their impartial outlook on the fates of the characters.

But a completely unclouded vision is impossible to achieve, and an impartial outlook is hard to maintain. The DM strives for both, but inevitably falls short. Rules, by which I mean formal processes for adjudicating outcomes, are a tool for clarifying the vision of the world and for maintaining impartiality. Used consistently, they provide a coherent tactical landscape in which players can make choices. They become a tool for the players and the DM to arrive at a consensus about the fictional world.

Creative Modes

There are two distinct creative modes that the DM engages in running the game. The first mode, what I call the "planning" mode, is what they use in selecting modules to run, writing their own material where required, and generally doing the work of ensuring that there is meaningful adventure to be found in the world the characters inhabit.

In this mode the DM may freely consider things like finding appropriate challenges for the characters' level, ensuring that the game is fun for the players, and pursing their own creative interests in the subject matter of the game. In this mode strict modelling of the world takes a back-seat to the needs of the game, and the need to find a compelling challenge for the characters to engage with.

The second mode is what I call the "simulation" mode. Here, the DM becomes a ruthless arbiter of the fictional world, as inexorable and as uncaring as gravity. In this mode the DM does not consider the players' enjoyment, nor their own creative desires. Their creative input is in *interpreting* the prepared material, through the lens of their vision of the world and their belief about what follows naturally from what is already established.

Rules

Die of fate

Engle Matrix Games, Cairn

When the DM must make a decision with insufficient information, determine the likelihood of various outcomes, establish with the players that these odds are reasonable, and then roll a die to find out what comes to pass.

For example, "Is the blacksmith at home?" We know it's the middle of the day and he usually works from his home, but he might possibly have been called away on some errand. We might determine the odds as five out of six. Once that's established and agreed, we roll the dice.

> Players' arguments for swaying the odds should be attended carefully, and where possible acceded to. Consensus on the odds is important in establishing the legitimacy of the roll, especially when a character's life is on the line.

Encounter tables

Basic D&D

Write a list of people, creatures, and natural phenomena in the area, regardless of the danger those represent to player characters. When the characters might encounter such a thing, roll on the table to find out what is encountered.

> Encounter tables and reaction rolls are a powerful tool for preserving a DM's impartiality. Knowing who the characters meet and how they react makes it much easier to judge the outcomes of those encounters.

Reaction rolls

Basic D&D

When the player characters encounter one or more intelligent beings, roll 2d6 (possibly modified by characters' abilities). Higher scores represent a more favourable outlook towards the player characters. Reaction rolls might be repeated after a round of negotiations, allowing for first impressions to be improved upon (or for relations to deteriorate further!).

Formal time tracking

Basic D&D, Torchbearer

The passage of time in the game is tracked in terms of formal game "turns" in which a predetermined amount of activity may take place, and after which the DM may engage with mechanics such as depletion of supplies, random encounters, fatigue, and so on.

Doom clock

Apocalypse World

When things happen outside the player characters' view, the DM marks progress around a predetermined "clock", which tracks the progress of the unseen threat. Each section reflects concrete changes in the game world. For example, a clock showing the progress in a cult taking over a town might have the first sector marked "a few cult gatherings at night", the second "cult practices openly in the streets", and then "cult members in positions of power" and so on.

Experience

A simulated world to explore, and a system for scoring points in that world. Real risks, and commensurate rewards. Together, these two factors create the core of the game. Without the simulated world, the game is just a mathematical toy. But without experience points, the game is directionless. An objective, in-world means of gaining points gives us a purpose in engaging with the fictional world, and a measure of our success in doing so.

Experience points and level

Are experience points a measure of a character's learning and training? This conception breaks down on examination. Experience points are an extra-diegetic scoring mechanism. They let you compare your performance in the game to other players, to your past performance, and to concrete milestones of achievement. Experience points are tied to level as a pacing mechanism, gradually giving access to new and more complex modes of play.

Level thresholds

The typical scheme asserts a geometric relationship between experience points and level. Each level requires an exponentially greater (typically double) amount of experience points to reach.

The effect of this is to naturally and gradually change the nature of play as characters advance. Adventures which once seemed attractive and lucrative now appear trivial. In order to make meaningful gains, characters must seek out larger and more meaningful goals in the world. A side effect is to ease the burden on low-level characters among higher-level peers. An adventure that grants meaningful rewards to a fight level character will provide more than enough points for a first level character to catch up very quickly.

Rules

Points for gold

Basic D&D, Tunnels and Trolls

Every gold piece brought out of the dungeon grants one experience point, divided evenly among the surviving characters. Alternatively, characters might only get experience for the treasure they personally carry from the dungeon, making the division of spoils particularly fraught.

Points for combat

Basic D&D, Tunnels and Trolls

Monsters and other foes encountered and subdued in the dungeon award points in relation to their hit dice. For example, 100 points per hit die. Typically these are divided among all the characters participating in the combat.

Points for exploration

Tunnels and Trolls

Points are awarded for returning safely from some dangerous location. In dungeons this might mean 100 times the dungeon level in points, or for hexes 10 times the distance of the hex from "home base".

Points for danger

Tunnels and Trolls

Surviving dangerous situations grants points. For example, succeeding on a saving throw might grant 100 points, or more for more difficult saves. Coming back from zero hit points is another possible source of points.

Points for attendance

Blackhack

Characters gain a fixed amount of experience at the end of each session their player attended.

Quest experience

Coup de Main, Whitehack

Players can declare "quests" for their character, identifying an in-world goal their character is attempting to achieve. The DM will offer a number of experience points for attaining this goal. Quests might be shared among characters, in which case the experience points are divided among the participants.

Does some mystical odour adhere to treasure in dungeons, such that it grants power to those who find it? Clearly not. XP for gold is an abstraction, and fine parsing of the circumstances in which points can be gained leads to absurd scenarios.

A quick analysis will show that points for attendance is a meaningless mechanic. What risks is a character incentivised to take if they gain the same number of points regardless? In this scheme, characters are best-off staying home and learning to knit.

Active quests might attenuate the points gained from other sources. For example, you might gain only 50% of the value of treasure in experience while on a rescue quest.

Milestone advancement

Into the Odd

Rather than awarding experience points, characters simply advance a level when they achieve particular milestones in the fictional world. For example, characters achieve second level as soon as they return from their first adventure, or characters are considered fifth level when they have been granted a noble title and land.

Functional milestone advancement requires that the milestones be explicit and determined ahead of time, and have objective in-fiction criteria which can be achieved through multiple routes. Milestones need to drive players to engage with the substance of the game.

Initiative

What's the process for players declaring what their characters do? In normal human conversations two people can't talk at once, so someone has to go first. Most of the time this isn't very important, but in situations where multiple characters are in a high-stakes interaction, this becomes very important indeed.

So how do we resolve this? Do we go back and forth until we reach agreement? Or do we create some kind of rule that dictates who has to speak first? This is the "intent" portion of initiative systems.

There's another, related problem which is often rolled up into initiative systems. While technically all actions might happen simultaneously, for most people this is fiddly and annoying to resolve. Much easier to have the outcome of an action resolved and committed before the next one starts. In this case, which action gets resolved first? This is the "action" portion of initiative systems.

In military theory initiative refers to the ability to dictate the terms of a conflict, the ability to choose where and when the fight happens. Often, by resolving who gets to declare their intent first, and which actions get resolved first, initiative systems also involve this third meaning of initiative.

Rounds

The essential unit of initiative is the round. This represents an amount of time in which each player declares an intent, their characters performs an action and everyone observes the results of that action. Shorter rounds imply a focus on detailed, individual actions, while longer rounds focus on broader intents and group actions.

A round might have "phases", in which different types of action take place. It is common, for example, to separate movement, melee, missile, and magic actions into different phases of a round. The purpose of this is to reduce some of the oddities that otherwise occur from resolving actions one at a time, and sometimes to ensure that faster actions occur before slower ones.

Bonuses

What kinds of things give a person or group an advantage in initiative? Here are some options:

- Individual dexterity, intelligence, or wisdom
- Having a lighter weapon, or longer reach
- Following a prepared plan or drilled manoeuvre
- Having greater situational awareness or better vision given the lighting
- Being more experienced in combat

Rules

Basic

Basic D&D, Knave

Roll 1d6. 1-3 the enemies go first, 4-6 the players go first (freely talking amongst themselves to determine actions). Alternatively, both sides roll a die and highest goes first. Combat proceeds in alternating turns from then on, or else you can re-roll initiative each round.

No System

Apocalypse World

Intentions are stated as they come up, there is open negotiation, and actions are taken in an order determined by the DM. There are no strict "rounds". A character might get more than one action before another gets to act, depending on how long the actions take.

Simultaneous

Tunnels and Trolls

Intentions are declared in no particular order, with free revision. Once everyone has declared, the outcomes of actions are resolved simultaneously. If a character is taken out of the fight, this doesn't take effect until the end of the round, and their action for the round is still completed.

Individual

D&D 5e

Every player and monster rolls a die and adds a relevant bonus. Actions are declared and resolved in order from highest to lowest. Some systems simplify this, having player characters simply acting before or after their enemies.

Alternatively cards are dealt rather than rolling dice. Some

The simultaneous approach probably makes most sense with longer rounds, where a round represents several exchanges of blows between many adversaries. In these cases it doesn't make much sense to be picky about whose attacks are resolved first. Over the course of a minute or more you'd expect both parties to land several telling blows. A challenge with this approach, especially at low levels, is the relative frequency of both participants in a combat being taken out of action. Depending on how you model damage, this might feel unrealistic.

characters might be dealt extra cards (keeping the highest or acting on both), or else discard and redraw cards below a given value. Optionally, high cards (Jokers, for example) might give additional bonuses to that character's actions.

Intent and action phases

RuneQuest

Every player and NPC declares their intent for the round (possibly in an order determined by a dice roll), and then every player resolves their characters' actions (in dice roll order).

Systems that separate the declaration of actions from their resolution lead to situations where actions "fail" because their targets are invalid. The first character's attack kills the orc, so the second character's attack is wasted, for example. This is generally considered an advantage of these systems, simulating the chaos of battle and rewarding players who plan and coordinate carefully. The cost of this is additional handling time.

Free and Clear

Sorcerer, Trollbabe

Everyone declares intended actions, in no particular order, and with the opportunity to revise. Once intents are established, everyone rolls for their actions. Actions are resolved in order from highest roll to lowest. established, everyone rolls for their actions. Actions are resolved in order from highest roll to lowest.

Deterministic

Actions are declared and/or resolved in order of

When initiative is more predictable, it can become a bigger focus for tactical manoeuvring by the players. If you know that charging a line of spears means taking an attack from each spearman before you can get a strike in, then you're going to think carefully about ways you can disrupt their line before you attack.

some fixed characteristic of the characters. For example from greatest to least reach (i.e. the weapon that can strike the furthest away from the wielder goes first). As another example, actions could be declared in order from greatest to least social rank of the characters. Knights declare first, followed by commoners.

Manoeuvre and melee

Coup de Main

There are two kinds of rounds - long "manoeuvre" rounds, and short "melee" rounds. Combat begins with manoeuvre rounds, during which characters can:

- Fetch items from packs
- Cast spells
- Load, aim and shoot missile weapons
- Move tactically on the battlefield

- Charge into melee

As soon as melee begins, play shifts to melee rounds, in which a character can:

- Make a melee attack
- Disengage from melee

When everyone in the melee has either disengaged or run out of hit points (or a set number of rounds have passed), play enters manoeuvre rounds once again.

Advantage

Coup de Main

Initiative is rolled for both sides. The winning side "holds the initiative" for a number of rounds equal to the difference between the die rolls, after which initiative is rolled again. "Holding the initiative" means striking first in each round, as well as the ability to dictate positioning in the melee - for example, choosing who fights whom. The side which holds the initiative may also break off from the melee at the end of any round. Typically this is combined with a distinction between manoeuvre and melee rounds.

Act quickly, act slowly

Errant

Each round players choose to act quickly, and take one action before their enemies, or act slowly and take *two* actions *after* their enemies (only one action may be an attack).

Strike rank

RuneQuest

Rounds are divided into segments (often 10 or 12). At the start of a round, everyone declares their intent. Each type of action "costs" a number of segments. Segments are counted in order and actions resolve when the segment matching their cost is reached. Optionally, players might be allowed to declare new intents when their actions resolve, and potentially resolve more than one action per round, if the segment cost is low enough. Example action costs for a 12-segment round might be:

- Attack with light weapon: 4 segments
- Attack with heavy weapon: 8 segments
- Nock arrow: 4 segments
- Draw and shoot bow: 6 segments
- Loose crossbow bolt: 1 segment
- Reload crossbow: 24 segments

Characters might have bonuses or penalties to the segment cost of their actions depending on their statistics.

Turn Taking

Warlock

Combatants are divided into "sides", with the player characters on one side and the DM's NPCs on the other. The sides dice for first turn, with the winner choosing a character from their side to act. The other side then chooses a character from their own side, and so on until every character has acted at least once. If a side runs out of characters to choose, then all of the other side's remaining characters may act.

Blind simultaneous

Torchbearer

Characters or sides independently choose actions for the next round (or several rounds). These choices are then revealed and resolved. Typically this will use cards or tokens to indicate choices.

Elective Action Order

Marvel Heroic Roleplaying

Players dice for initiative. The highest roll goes first, resolving their action. After a player resolves an action, they then nominate another player character or NPC who has not yet acted to resolve their action. Play proceeds until all characters have resolved an action, and then the round begins again, with the last player to act in each round choosing the first to act in the next round.

Action cards

Streetfight, Troika

Two or more cards representing each character and group of enemies into a combined deck. For example Cormac the Fighter is represented by the King of Clubs and the King of Spades. The town guards are represented by the Two of Hearts and the Two of Diamonds. All four cards are shuffled into the deck, along with two Aces and one Joker

More "gamey" systems, where the players make tactical choices about how they interact with the system are fun and can add more tactical depth in the game, but they can also draw focus away from the fictional events, and result in a more "board gamey" feel to combat.

- When a card is drawn, the character represented by the card takes an action, or else the player sets the card aside.
- After a character takes an action and before the next card is drawn, a player with a set-aside card can play that card and have their character take an action.
- When an Ace is drawn, the next character to have their card drawn may take an extra action.
- When a Joker is drawn, all cards (including set-aside cards) are shuffled back into the deck.

Alternatively, this can be done with tokens in a bag.

Hit Points

These games are about people doing risky, violent things. Risk and violence come with the implicit threat of injury and death. We would like our characters to sometimes be able to fail in their endeavours without immediate death or dismemberment. We could achieve this by artificially reducing the chances of these negative outcomes - giving our heroes a chance for miraculously avoiding danger or shrugging off damage. The trouble with this approach is that outcomes become essentially binary. A hero either avoids danger with no cost to themselves, or else they face dire consequences. What we'd like is a system where facing danger costs a hero, without immediately taking them out of action.

Hit points are a system for enabling this. Rather than dying, a number of points are lost from a pool. When the points run out, only then does our character succumb to death or serious injury.

What are hit points?

- Hit points are "luck". They represent the universe looking out for your character. Losing hit points looks like near misses and miraculous escapes. Going up levels means you are getting luckier.
- Hit points are "skill". They represent your character's ability to physically avoid danger. Losing hit points looks like avoiding the worst of a blow or dodging away from danger. Going up levels makes you more skilled.
- Hit points are "toughness". They represent your character being difficult to hurt or resistant to injury. Losing hit points looks like getting hit and keeping on going, taking terrible injuries and shrugging them off. Going up levels makes you tougher.
- Hit points are "protagonism". Hit points represent how important your character is in the world, and therefore how much circumstances conspire to keep them alive. Losing hit points looks like the injury wasn't so bad after all, something saved you at the last minute, you somehow keep on fighting. Going up levels means you are becoming a more central character.

Healing

Losing hit points implies some way of regaining hit points. Traditionally, hit points are recovered through healing, either through natural rest or through magical effects. Magical healing was introduced early in the history of the game as a response to the problem of characters with large hit point pools, which replenished relatively slowly through natural healing. Magical healing accelerates this process and removes the need for long periods of down-time. Alternative schemes for handling this problem usually involve faster recovery of hit points. Common schemes include:

- All damage heals at the end of the session/adventure
- All damage heals after a night's rest
- Heal 1hp per night of rest
- Heal 1d6+CON bonus per night of rest

What constitutes a "night's rest" may also vary, from eight hours spent resting in any environment, to a full week of rest and relaxation in a civilised setting.

How you model hit points in your rules will affect how hit points are recovered. If hit points represent physical toughness, then it makes sense that recovering them is slow and requires dedicated rest. If hit points are something more abstract, like "protagonism", then they can plausibly be recovered much more quickly.

The speed of healing has other effects. Long periods of downtime for healing will mean that the passage of time in your campaign is a more pressing concern, and will make things like paying for lodging and the upkeep of equipment more relevant.

Rules

No hit points

Characters don't have hit points. Characters are ordinary people in a dangerous world.

Rolled hit points

Basic D&D, Knave

The number of hit points a character starts with is determined by rolling a die. The type of die and any bonuses are determined by class and ability scores. Each time a character advances a level, they roll again and add hit points (or re-roll all hit dice).

Fixed hit points

D&D3e, D&D4e, D&D5e

Characters start with a fixed number of hit points, based on their class and adding any bonuses/penalties from ability scores. They gain a fixed number of hit points as they go up levels.

Re-rolled hit points

Carcosa, Coup de Main

Characters re-roll their hit dice to determine hit points at the start of each adventure, and after a period of rest. Bonus or penalties apply to this roll based on:

- The quality of the facilities
- The length of the rest
- Level of exhaustion prior to resting

Dead at zero

Basic D&D

A character is dead as soon as they reach zero hit points or fewer.

Negative hit points

AD&D, D&D3e, D&D4e

If a character takes damage that takes them below zero hit points, they go into "negative" hit points. They are unconscious or otherwise unable to take actions. If healing magic or other effects can raise them back into positive hit points, they recover.

Other effects might be associated with negative hit points. Some systems add that characters with negative hit points lose additional hit points every round, and if their negative hit points exceed their constitution score, they are dead.

Injury at zero

Errant, Cairn

When a character takes damage which brings them to zero hit points, they suffer serious and potentially permanent injuries which may lead to death. These injuries are rolled on a table, with a bonus applied based on the amount of damage that the character just took. Injury tables might have different entries for sharp and blunt damage, fire, and so on.

Ability damage

Traveller, Cairn

Once a character has lost all their hit points (or instead of using hit points at all), points of damage are deducted from a character's ability scores. Typically constitution is targeted, but potentially all physical stats can be used. When a character can not deduct further points, they are killed.

Healing after battle

Whitehack

Characters who have time to rest and tend wounds after a battle may heal some amount of hit points, typically 1d4 or 1d6-3.

Hit point cancel

Blood of Pangea, Coup de Main

When your character would suffer some negative outcome: knocked down, poisoned, enchanted and so on, you can spend hit points to avoid that effect. Costs vary depending on the strength of the negative outcome. A deadly threat might cost 10 or 20 hit points, a less serious one only 5.

Hit point cancel represents a powerful insight into the nature of hit points. If hit points are not simply physical toughness or health, and represent some abstract resistance to danger, then there's no reason they should apply only to physical attacks.

Stress damage

Coup de Main

When a character suffers emotional stress, encounters eldritch horrors, or fears for their life and soul, they must choose to either succumb to some primal reaction (flee/fight/go insane) or else take hit point damage.

Damage save

Whitehack

Once per battle, when your character is hit by an attack that would damage them, you may make a saving throw to reduce the damage by some amount (1d6 for example). If the save fails however, the character takes full damage and suffers some additional consequence.

Meat and Grit

Into the Odd

There is more than one pool of hit points, each representing different concepts. For example, your first hit die represents "Meat", i.e. physical injury, and subsequent hit dice represent "Grit", i.e. an ability to avoid danger or ignore pain. Points are lost from Grit first, and a character is only physically hurt when this pool is depleted and they lose points of Meat.

Hit points as resource

Tunnels and Trolls, Whitehack

Hit points can be spent to empower other abilities, for example magic, powerful attacks, or certain skills.

Banked damage

Them Deeper Bones

Hit points are not expressed as a single pool, but rather the value of each hit die is recorded. For example a character with two hit dice might have their hit points expressed as "4, 6". When this character takes damage, a die roll which beats one of their rolled hit dice eliminates that die. For example, if a d6 of damage is rolled against the above character, a roll of 5 would eliminate their "4" hit die, and a roll of 6 would eliminate their "6" hit die. Damage which does not eliminate a hit die is "banked" against the character. The die is kept and rolled again the next time the character is damaged, adding to the sum of the next roll.

The main appeal of banked damage as a concept is that it is a "math-less" system for accruing damage. You don't have to perform subtraction of numbers, just simple comparison. Whether this makes the game simpler or more complex is unclear.

Alternatively, rather than rolling ahead of time, hit dice can be rolled as a "saving throw" against damage. If the hit die rolls higher than the damage the damage is banked, if the hit die rolls equal or lower, the hit die is lost.

Characters who have no hit dice remaining are taken out of combat.

Ability Scores

The six ability scores: Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma are probably the most enduring feature of D&D variants and home-brew systems. Rolling these stats in order on 3d6 is something of a shibboleth for "real" old-school systems.

Despite this, ability scores are probably one of the least meaningful parts of these systems. Ability scores are often not referenced extensively by the system, and when they are they're often converted to bonuses and the raw values are ignored.

There's also considerable variation in how the scores are interpreted. What's the difference between Intelligence and Wisdom? What does Charisma really mean? Why does a high Dexterity let you run fast and also perform close-up magic?

Meanings of abilities

Strength

- Muscle power
- Athletic ability
- Size

Dexterity

- Running speed
- Athletic ability
- Manual dexterity
- Hand-eye coordination

Constitution

- Health
- Fitness
- Resistance to injury
- Pain tolerance
- Poison tolerance

Intelligence

- Book learning
- Memory
- Facility with languages
- Deductive reasoning

Wisdom

- Knowledge of lore
- Common sense
- Willpower
- Perception

Charisma

- Physical beauty
- Attractiveness
- Force of personality
- Social skills

Generation methods

There are a myriad of generation methods: the much-vaunted 3d6-in-order, point-buy, 4d6-drop-lowest, 3d6-then-swap, and so on. There are generally two distinguishing factors for any of these systems:

Do players choose their class before or after they generate ability scores?

Systems where ability scores are generated in a fixed order usually require players to choose a class (if the system has classes) *after* they roll the dice. In this way players have less choice about the character they play (or must play sub-optimal characters) and some classes can be rarer in play because they need a specific combination of scores.

> What do these scores mean, anyway? If an 18 in a score represents the peak of human performance, shouldn't it be rarer than ~3% of the population? If humans are capable of achieving higher than 18 in an ability, how do player characters get there?

When players can arrange scores among their attributes then there's more scope to choose any desired class and make the attributes work. On the other hand, it places more onus on the system to make each ability roughly equal in utility.

Which of these is desirable depends on a lot of factors, for example whether players enjoy being forced into a new or uncomfortable class, making "special" classes truly special, allowing players to follow their interests, and simply allowing easier use of class-specific character sheets.

Are player characters at first level ordinary people, or extraordinary heroes?

A system in which player characters at first level have the same range of scores as ordinary humans (3d6-in-order, for example) implies that characters at this level are ordinary people, no different from their stay-at-home peers.

Given that player characters above first level are by definition *not* ordinary people, this suggests that these characters might have some means for increasing their ability scores.

Conversely, systems which give starting characters ability scores higher than an average human's imply that player characters are heroes even before they go on any adventures.

Rules

No ability scores

Blood of Pangea

Characters are represented by qualitative traits ("strong as an ox", "brave", "well-schooled") rather than numeric scores.

Only physical abilities

Cairn

Characters only have physical abilities: Strength, Dexterity, and Constitution. Any non-physical abilities should rely on the players' skill.

Racial modifiers

AD&D, Tunnels and Trolls

Characters belonging to non-human races have ability scores modified according to that race's genetic heritage. For example, Dwarves are hardy folk and therefore Dwarf characters receive +2 Constitution, Fairies are small and slight, and so their Strength value is 25% of the rolled value.

A near-infallible result of racial modifiers is that players choose a race which compliments their character class. This tends to undercut the desired outcome of separating race and class options.

Ability advancement

D&D5e, Tunnels and Trolls

At particular level intervals (or every level), players may choose one or more of their ability scores to increase, typically by one point.

Roll over advancement

Blackhack, Into the Odd, Heartseeker, Knave

When a character goes up a level, roll a d20 for each ability score. If the roll is above the current value, that ability's value increases by one point.

Luck

Tunnels and Trolls, Dungeon Crawl Classics

Luck as an ability represents fate smiling on a character, or else a simple catch-all ability for when nothing else applies. Some systems use luck exclusively for saving throws, for cases where nothing but chance dictates a character's fate. Luck is sometimes used as a consolation prize for characters with otherwise terrible ability scores. Sometimes players are able to permanently spend points of luck in exchange for advantage on a roll, or to re-roll failures.

Bonus and defence

Knave

Ability scores are generated by rolling 3d6 and choosing the lowest. This score is the "bonus" and is added to all rolls using that ability. The score +10 is the "defence" and is the difficulty for offensive rolls against the character.

Only bonuses

Maze Rats

Instead of ability scores in the 3-18 range, scores are generated in a smaller range (-3 to +3, for example), and these are applied as direct bonuses/penalties to dice rolls.

Caterpillar dice

Goblin's Henchman blog

Roll 3d6 and gather them into a "block" with the three dice stacked side by side. This block of dice will generate six stats as follows:

- The sum of the three front faces.
- The sum of the three top faces.
- The sum of the three back faces.
- The sum of the four exposed faces of the left-hand die.
- The sum of the front, top, and rear face of the right-hand die, *minus* the right-facing face.
- The sum of the three exposed faces of the middle die.

I wasn't going to put any ability score generation methods in here, but this one tickles me for some reason. I think it's the way it generates scores which are somewhat even between characters, but much more random and varied than point-buy systems.

Task Resolution

When a player says that their character attempts something, the DM must make a choice about the consequences of that attempt. Sometimes that choice is obvious - we know enough about the capabilities of the character or the difficulty of the task to either accept the attempt as successful, or else to rule it as impossible. Characters can walk and breathe and open doors and draw their weapons usually without incident. But sometimes we do not have sufficient clarity of vision to make such a ruling. We either have insufficient knowledge of the characters' precise abilities, unclear imagining of the exact circumstances of the attempt, or else we believe that innumerable small and unaccountable factors might govern success or failure. In these cases we turn to task resolution - a roll of the dice which tells us whether a character is successful or unsuccessful in their attempt.

Stakes

What is a character able to achieve with a single roll of the dice? How does the state of the fictional world change after the roll? These are the stakes of the resolution. Depending on the system, stakes might be very explicitly set by the rules, or they might be very ambiguous. Ambiguous stakes give a lot of leeway to a DM to unconsciously or accidentally make a task much easier or much harder. Creeping past some guards without alerting them might take a single roll, or it might take a series of rolls: "you're up to the gate, now roll to get through the gate, now roll to get across the square" and so on. This is sometimes called "roll until you succeed" or "roll until you fail". Where the system leaves stakes ambiguous, it's on the DM to strictly announce the stakes of resolution ahead of the roll of the dice.

Skills

A common addition to task resolution systems is the concept of "skills". These are particular kinds of task that a character has greater chance of success with.

Traditionally the game has been suspicious of the concept of skills, preferring either fixed abilities tied to class, or else subsuming all question of skill into ability scores. Skills add to the complexity of a character and therefore take up more time in character creation. Skills can also become restrictive. The presence of a skill on one character sheet means the absence of that skill for every other character. Does that mean that these characters can't attempt this kind of task? Skills can narrow the scope of actions a character chooses to take.

Rules

Fixed chances

Basic D&D

Specific tasks have a fixed chance of success, sometimes based on a character's level. For example elves have a 1 in 6 chance of detecting secret doors, or thieves have a 25% chance of climbing a wall.

Historically the game has tended to resist unifying "core systems" in favour of bespoke arrangements for each class and ability. This possibly reflects house-rules and ad-hoc solutions ossifying into rules texts, but it also has its own charm.

While it's more complex to administer such systems, they can neatly reflect the priorities of the table and become the subject of detailed tactical play.

Roll under ability

Basic D&D, Heartseeker

The DM chooses a relevant ability score, and the player must roll under that ability score on a d20 to succeed. Optionally, the score may be penalised by some difficulty factor.

Roll vs. target number

D&D 3e, Maze Rats

The DM sets a difficulty level and chooses a relevant ability score (or skill). The player rolls a d20, adds their ability score/skill bonus, and compares it to the target number.

One of the challenges of systems where the DM must set a difficulty is that it's often hard to be objective and consistent with difficulty levels, especially when there are fine-grained levels of difficulty. Setting a difficulty anywhere between 5 and 25 is harder than choosing between "normal", "easy" and "hard", for example.

Roll under ability, over difficulty

Whitehack, Errant

As with "roll under ability", except the player is also trying to roll *over* a difficulty set by the DM. This is mathematically identical to rolling with a penalty, but involves less mental arithmetic.

Dice pool

Platemail, Torchbearer

A character's facility with a given task translates into a number of dice which the player rolls to determine success. Dice which beat a fixed target number (for example, 5+ on a d6) are "successes". The number of successes rolled determines the degree/quality of success.

An attractive quality of dice pool systems is the asymptotic benefits of higher levels of ability. More dice is always better, but each extra die has a progressively smaller effect on the chances of success. That makes these systems robust to wide ranges of ability level, and amenable to procedures for adding extra dice for various circumstances.

Advantage/ disadvantage

D&D 5e, Heartseeker

When a character has an advantage on a task, the player may roll an extra die and choose the more favourable result. Conversely, disadvantage causes a player to roll an extra die and choose the least favourable roll. Typically advantage and disadvantage cancel out so that a player is never rolling both an advantage die and a disadvantage die.

The effect of advantage on your chance of success is complicated, but on a d20 it usually equates to roughly +/-5, or an increase of 25% in your chance of success.

Pushing

Five Ancient Kingdoms

Characters who wish to ensure success on a task can in appropriate circumstances "push" themselves to receive a bonus on their task roll, typically in the order of an advantage die, a +5 bonus on a d20, or similar. However, if the task fails despite this bonus the character receives some additional penalty for the loss.

Alternatively, the push might cost some resource, such as "inspiration" points, or even hit points.

Freeform skills

Whitehack, Blood of Pangea

Rather than a fixed list of possible skills, players can choose a more broad descriptor, maybe a job or a background, which grants the character particular skills. Whenever that descriptor seems relevant to the task, the player may roll with some additional advantage.

Combat

Combat represents the perfect storm of challenges for impartial simulation. It involves a large number of unpredictable and unknowable factors, complex interactions, and minute variations. It combines this with the highest possible stakes: the lives of the characters. No surprise then that combat attracts such detailed and formalised rules.

Combat also represents a central subject of investigation for the game. We play because we're interested in violence and its outcomes, in the clash of strength against strength. A more perfect understanding of the mechanics of those interactions is one of the goals of play, and one of its outcomes is more finely-tuned rules which reflect that understanding.

Baseline combat

There's substantial agreement across rule variants on the core tenets of combat rules: Division into rounds, the attack roll, the damage roll, etc. Combat is about depleting your opponent's pool of hit points before they do the same to you. These core concepts have remained fairly stable since the first editions of the game, not, I think, due to any inherent merit in the approach but rather from familiarity. Rules are presented here as variations from this baseline.

Particulars

The baseline system tends to forefront individual prowess, choice of weapons and armour, and chance as decisive factors in combat. Morale, unit cohesion, position and flanking, and other factors tend to be less emphasised. A system that gave due weight to all of these factors would likely be unworkably complex, and so each system makes choices about which elements are highlighted. These choices determine the kinds of decisions the players will make in the game, and the details they will pay attention to.

Rules
Pooled combat

Chainmail, Torchbearer, Tunnels and Trolls

Sides in a combat roll their dice together to determine the outcome, with stronger fighters adding more dice to the pool. For example,

characters and monsters might add one die per hit die, or dice in relation to their strength. The overall sum of the dice, or else the number of dice meeting a target number determines the outcome of the combat.

Stunts

Knave, Coup de Main

When a participant in combat wants to do something that improves their tactical situation but which might not directly damage their opponent, they may make an ability check to do so, with the results being dictated by the DM.

Alternatively, attacks which have a high degree of success (for example 5 points over the target number) entitle the attacker to demand additional tactical benefits: pushing the enemy back, moving through the combat, keeping one enemy between yourself and another, etc. Superior degrees of success (10 over target, for example) might entitle the attacker to even greater benefits: knocking an enemy down, hitting a specific location, bypassing armour, etc. These attacks always do their normal damage in addition to any tactical benefits.

When combat is about depleting your opponent's hit points as fast as possible, any tactical manoeuvre must be judged on its net effect on enemy hit points. There are few cases where a chance of some small tactical benefit outweighs the certainty of dealing damage. Consequently combat becomes very static. Systems which allow stunts *in addition* to any normal effects of an attack tend to encourage greater dynamism.

Stakes die

Them Deeper Bones

At the start of each combat, the stakes die is set at 0, or "no die". After any round of combat in which no damage was dealt, the die increases by one step: 0, d4, d6, d8, etc.

Roll and add the stakes die to the total of every attack roll.

Hit die as damage die

Heartseeker

Successful attacks roll damage using the attacker's hit die. For example fighters, with a hit die of d10, always roll d10 damage.

Critical Hits

Five Ancient Kingdoms, D&D3-5e, Knave

Critical hits are attacks which have some additional effect due to the quality of the attack.

Circumstances which might trigger a critical hit include:

- Rolling the maximum value on an attack die
- Rolling sufficiently above the required value to hit
- Exactly matching the target number required to hit
- Rolling within some range determined by the weapon used or the class of the attacker (for example, scimitars score a critical on a roll of 19-20).

The outcome of a critical hit might be one of the following:

- Double rolled damage
- Rolling twice as many damage dice
- Immediately killing lower-level foes
- Damaging the armour or weapon of the foe
- Causing immediate injury or penalty

Critical Fumbles

Knave

The evil cousin of critical hits. Circumstances which trigger critical fumbles are the inverse of critical hits: rolling a 1 on an attack die, etc.

Just as critical hits make players feel great, critical fumbles make them feel terrible! They can turn a serious and stressful clash of arms into a comedy of errors, and brave heroes into clowns. Is the extra degree of detail afforded by critical fumbles worth that cost?

The result of a critical fumble might be:

- Dropping a weapon
- Degrading equipment or armour
- Taking damage to hit points

Morale

Basic D&D, Knave, Five Ancient Kingdoms

Monsters and hirelings do not fight to the death, but rather will sometimes retreat or flee when faced with deadly force. Typically this is some kind of check against a morale rating. Things which might trigger a morale check:

- Losing their leader
- Their first casualty in combat
- Losing half or more their numbers
- Facing magical threats
- A successful manoeuvre by a character (a fearless charge, a blood-curdling war cry, a gruesome kill, etc.)
- Losing over half their hit points
- Being ambushed
- Being outnumbered more than 2:1
- Facing an overwhelming foe (huge, notorious, impervious, etc.)

Morale systems tend to assume that the player characters themselves are immune to such effects, and in the absence of magical compulsion will do what their players tell them.

Weapon vs. armour

AD&D, Coup de Main

Certain weapons are more effective against certain armours. For example, the poleaxe and misericord were designed to penetrate or avoid heavy armour, and mail armour supposedly offers less protection against crushing blows.

Rules can model these differences to a greater or lesser extent, from detailed tables cross-referencing each available weapon against every type of armour, to simple circumstance bonuses adjudicated on the fly by the DM.

Shields shall be splintered

Trollsmyth blog, Blackhack, Maze Rats

When a character is carrying a shield and is hit by a successful attack, they may choose to have their shield sundered rather than take any damage. Formulations vary on whether the choice is made before or after the die is rolled, whether a saving throw is required, and whether the damage is completely negated or just reduced by some amount.

This rule results in a lot more broken shields than seems plausible, but the tactical choice about which hit to ignore is a pleasing one, and shields are otherwise under-rated compared to their historical use.

No attack roll

Into the Odd

Rather than rolling to hit, attackers simply roll their damage die directly.

No damage roll

Maze Rats

Rather than rolling damage, damage is determined by the difference between the attack roll and the target number.

Armour as damage reduction

Into the Odd

Rather than increasing the target number for attacks, armour reduces the amount of damage

dealt by an attack, usually by 1-3 points per attack, depending on the type of armour.

An alternative approach is for armour to function as additional hit points, or to deflect damage based on the face value of the die (for example, any damage dice showing below a 3 are ignored).

Opposed combat

Tunnels and Trolls, Troika, Warlock

Rather than each combatant making an attack roll in turn, attack rolls are opposed against each other, with the higher roll dealing damage to the losing side.

In its simplest form, opposed combat can result in very "all or nothing" fights, where a superior combatant can win without taking much or any damage. Spite damage and bonuses for the initiator are ways of mitigating this.

"Spite" damage might cause small amounts of damage to the winner in spite of their victory.

Some formulations give the initiator of the attack a bonus to the opposed roll.

Relative distance

Warlock, A Dangerous Time

Rather than literal positioning in combat, positions are given in terms of approximate and relative distances: close, near, far, for example. Characters can move one "band" of distance in a round, and ranged weapons typically fire up to one band away.

Combat scales

Chainmail, Platemail, Errant

The rules for combat are different at different scales, or in different contexts. For example, duels might have more detailed rules than melee, or larger combats might use different rules than those with only a handful.

Weapon tags

Apocalypse World, A Dangerous Time, D&D5e

Weapons are "tagged" with various keywords which alter an otherwise simple combat system. For example:

- **Heavy.** Roll two damage dice and pick the highest.
- **Crushing**. Reduce target's armour by one point.
- **Elegant.** Attacker can use their Dexterity instead of Strength to aid their attacks.
- **Long.** Strikes first in the first round of combat.
- **Versatile.** The welder adds +1 to their armour class.

A bec-de-corbin is crushing, long, and heavy. A misericord is elegant and crushing. A rapier is elegant and versatile.

Player-facing rolls

Mörk Borg, the GLOG

Player characters make "defence" rolls when they are attacked, with a failure indicating that they are hit. Typically the defence roll will be modified by the defenders agility and armour, and the difficulty is set by the attacker's strength and skill.

Equipment

A character's equipment is often a far greater determinant of their effectiveness in the game than anything else on their character sheet. Having the right piece of equipment and using it intelligently can obviate many otherwise deadly challenges.

No wonder then that adjudicating exactly what a character has, and how they can use it is extremely important to the game. But it's also an area that resists formalism. "Equipment" is such a broad category and contains such varied subjects that it is very difficult to contain within strict systems.

Detailed tracking how much a character can carry, how long their torch can keep burning, and how much food and water they have left is notoriously time-consuming and pedantic.

Starting equipment

The standard arrangement is that characters begin the game with a sum of money (3d6 is common) with which to purchase their initial equipment. But shopping for starting equipment is probably the most time-consuming part of character creation in systems which use this. For this reason many systems have introduced methods which streamline the process.

Random starting equipment, class-based pick-lists, "adventurer packs" with pre-selected gear, and fixed starting equipment are all attempts at solutions to the same problem.

Rules

Usage die

Blackhack

Items that can be used up: ammunition, torches, supplies, magical charges, or even things that can be worn out: armour, rope, tools, have a "usage die". This is expressed as a die type, d4, d6, d8, etc. When the item is used, its usage die is rolled. If the result is a 1 or a 2, the usage die drops to the next lowest type. If a d4 usage die rolls a 1 or a 2, the item is used up.

Slot encumbrance

Knave, Cairn, Troika, Torchbearer

Characters have a number of item "slots" which they can use to carry equipment. Most items take up a single slot, while particularly large items take up more than one. A certain number of slots might be "close to hand", representing items that can be brought to bear quickly, while the remainder are packed away and time time to get to. One approach is to have items closer to the top of the list be easier to retrieve than items at the bottom.

In some systems a character's number of slots can be reduced by fatigue, injury or other effects, requiring the character to drop carried items.

Abstract wealth

Torchbearer

Rather than an explicit tally of coinage or weights of gold, wealth is expressed as an abstract score which is rolled whenever money is spent. For example a character might roll their wealth every time they stop in town to determine the kinds of amenities they can afford.

Monetary gains from adventuring might be expressed as a bonus to the wealth attribute, or else as temporary points which can be spent as a bonus on a wealth roll.

Theoretically the same system could be applied to all equipment: A character's level of encumbrance is given as a numeric value, which is rolled against to determine whether a specific item is available. In practice it seems that more explicit systems are preferred.

Depletion

Errant

Equipment which has some limited duration of use, for example torches, water supplies, rations and so on are not explicitly tracked. Rather, they have some number of "points" (typically 1 or 2) which are depleted by use. This depletion is marked using the same die roll that determines random encounters. For example, a d6 random encounter roll of 1 indicates an encounter, and a 6 indicates that all supplies mark depletion. Rolls in the dungeon deplete torches and lanterns (and maybe water), while rolls for overland travel deplete rations.

Alternatively, depletion might be marked from a particular result on an ability roll. For example, ammunition is depleted whenever you roll a 13 on a ranged attack.

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Gary Gygax's holy writ, straight from the brain to the pen.

Reprints of this game are available from Wizards of the Coast though drivethrurpg.com, and "retro clone" versions such as OSRIC abound.

Apocalypse World

Vincent Baker

Codifies a fiction-first approach to framing rules which has influenced a generation of games.

Purchase links and downloads at apocalypse-world.com

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TSR

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