

# How to get started with OSR

One Anon's compilation of tips from the /osrg/ community. Version 2.02, 2025-01-22.

## What the fuck's an OSR?

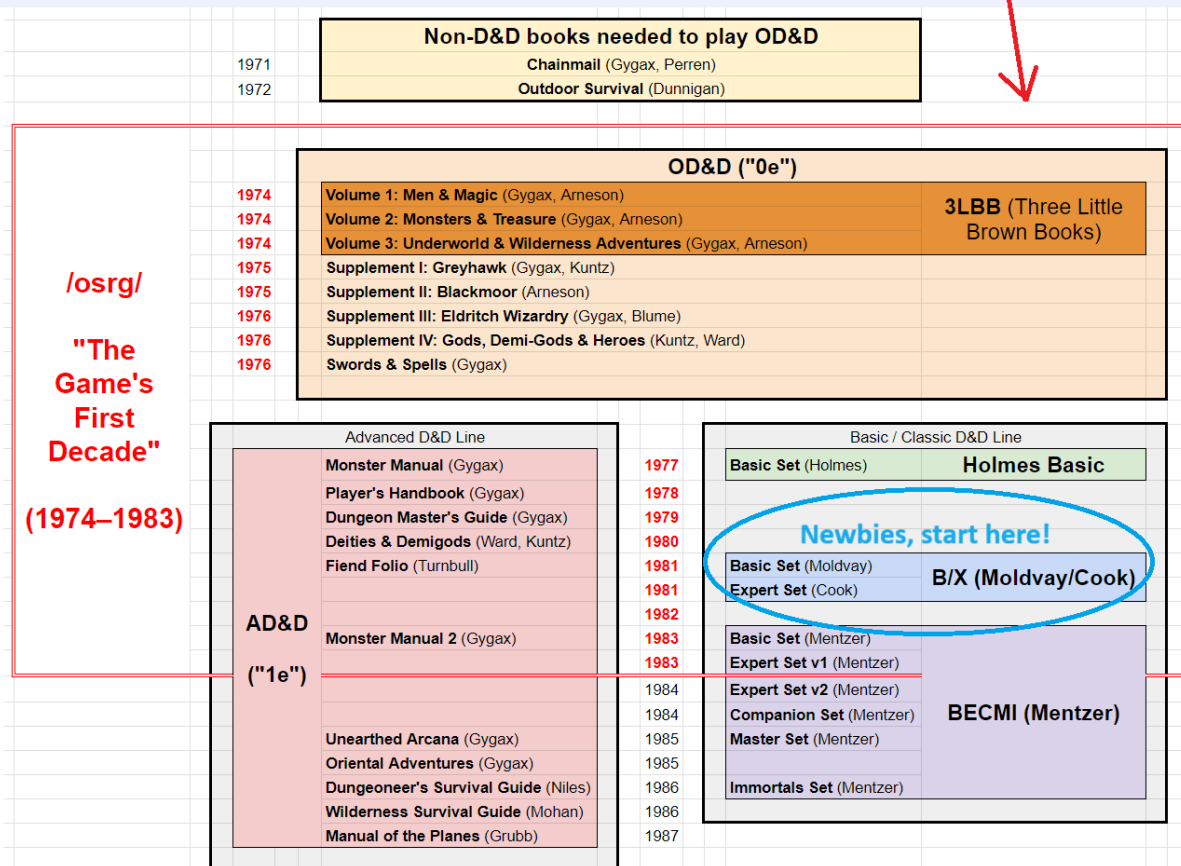
A common mistake is thinking the "Old" in OSR means "any game that I consider old". OSR is rooted in a specific time and place, and refers only to a certain kind of D&D and its very direct offshoots. Sadly, an ambiguous name can, if the movement is successful and lasts long enough, create confusion solely because the current internet landscape sucks ass, knowledge transmission is garbage now, and people are lazy.

♥ /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 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 I've collected some tips for those below.

**Learn by playing**, following these four easy steps:

1. Start by reading **B/X** (Moldvay's Basic and Cook's Expert).
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** in the next paragraph.
4. **Play!** You'll make mistakes, but don't sweat it, just review after the game.

# 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

---

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

## FAQ

---

### Can I start with AD&D or OD&D instead?

---

**AD&D: 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.

**OD&D: You can try,** but expect hard work and confusion. The rules are often opaque or incomplete — 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's recognised as the D&D signature since at least 1977; The Chainmail ones feature three completely different tables for mass combat, man-to-man engagements, and fights involving fantasy monsters, all based on the old school 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, and it is **not an OSR edition**. An appendix at the end of this document elaborates on why this is the case.

# What's the deal with BECMI and the Rules Cyclopedia?

---

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

Mentzer's **Basic/Expert v1 (B/E)** is very similar to B/X. It makes a couple good additions: An extended spell list and encumbrance values for items. It also makes some changes that are down to preference, chiefly that the THAC0, saves, and spell progressions were smoothed out (this Anon likes and uses them). Unfortunately, the examples of play and DM advice in B/E are worse than in B/X, which is why B/X is recommended 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 perfectly okay if you like them (very simplified domain rules, higher level spells, druids, possibly paladins), some are 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).

Apart from minor differences, the **Rules Cyclopedia** is a restatement of BECM.

## 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:** The omissions, some of which are 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**.

## Other retroclones

---

**Labyrinth Lord** (2007) is highly respected in OSR history, as it used to be the closest thing to a B/X clone until OSE took the legal risk of being mechanically completely faithful to the original, and with a much better layout to boot. **Good but superseded.**

**BFRPG** (2007) **is deprecated**. It removes XP for treasure, alters the dungeon stocking and treasure generation tables substantially, and introduces several unnecessary idiosyncrasies. As a result, it's neither a D&D *retroclone* nor recommended.

**Castles & Crusades** (2004) is an AD&D / AD&D 2e / D&D 3e hybrid. It inadvertently launched the OSR, in that people were hyped up for it only to be so **disappointed** when it actually came out that they went off to create OSRIC. It had a decent following in its early days, based on that initial hype and Troll Lords' relationship with Gygax, but the OSR sort of strangled it and while it continues today, it's kind of considered a **black sheep game** in the OSR community.

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.

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

---

When discussing the differences between AD&D and B/X, many people point to the extended character-building options. That's completely missing the gold that's in AD&D. Here are some cool and interesting ideas that you can include in your B/X game now or later to make it feel even more different from all that WotC crap.

## Write your own adventures

---

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.
- Your primary sources for procedural play are **Appendix A** and **Appendix B**.
- Remember that checks for wandering monsters in the Wilderness can actually lead to encounters with **Patrols** and **Fortresses** (DMG 182).
- Your secondary sources are **Wilderlands of High Fantasy** and **Wilderness Hexplore**. (Yes, even if you run a B/X game.)
- Consider running **cities** as if they were a dungeon or a wilderness, tracking time and checking for city encounters (DMG 191)
- Watch all of **GFC'S DND** videos on YouTube. Don't judge a video by its thumbnail! <https://www.youtube.com/@gfcsdnd205/videos>

## Multiple PCs per player

---

Consider allowing players to run **multiple PCs**, even from the first session.

## Strict time records

---

"**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 (more or less strict) **1:1 time** between sessions (DMG 37--38 and LBB 3 35--36). 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. It's the best RPG manual ever written, condensing the wisdom of many years of extensive DM'ing: most of the problems you will encounter are addressed there.

# How do I do mass combat?

---

Learn to run **combat with many monsters** quickly and efficiently. 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** as part of its domain rules, see below.

## I don't get it, what's this "brutal scaling" thing?

---

Pick a 1:N scale, **1:10 is the most natural**. Each figure represents a group of N combatants of the same type. Their HD, attacks, and damage are unchanged. The mass unit's HP are the average of the members of the unit. Combat then proceeds as normal with the exceptions below.

**Scale**, both time and space, is  $1:\sqrt{N}$ . So, at the 1:10 scale, each unit takes up three times as much linear space as it normally would, and one mass combat round lasts three "normal" melee rounds. *Rationale: The front of the unit has  $\sqrt{N}$  members and it attacks for  $\sqrt{N}$  rounds, for a total of N attacks against a unit of N opponents. Total attacks per round and total HP both scale as N, which justifies using the normal combat rules.*

**Speeds, distances, and areas.** Movement speeds scale as  $\sqrt{N}$  (tripled at the 1:10 scale). Spell and missile ranges: Read feet as yards when outdoors — so tripled, which is what makes the 1:10 scale the most natural. **Do not scale spell areas of effect!**

**"Big guy" types in melee:** Characters and monsters that are strong enough to stand on their own on the battlefield do so. When, on a section of the battlefield, there is a fight involving one or more "big guy" types, zoom in to the standard rules and run  $\sqrt{N}$  (three) rounds of standard combat for every round of mass combat. If a mass unit disengages from combat with the "big guy", convert any damage it's received back to the mass scale by taking an average.

**Spell casting.** Allowing spell casters to cast  $\sqrt{N}$  (three) spells per mass melee round doesn't work very well. This anon allows spell casters only one spell per mass combat round *as long as they're not engaged*, but allows them to move before casting their spell. Spells still need to be declared and can be disrupted.

## Domain play

---

Domain play can be started from the very early levels. A dozen mercenaries and a palisade on a hill are 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** — part of the first edition **Domains at War** expansion (2012), and included in the core rules in **ACKS II** (2024/2025).

# Appendix: Why is "AD&D" 2e deprecated?

---

I've had to add this discussion here in detail for reasons that should be pretty obvious to anybody who's spent any time on /osrg/.

## Differences that make AD&D 2e not OSR

---

### Its rules for awarding XP are a narrativist insult to your intelligence

Experience in AD&D 2e is awarded for idiotic things like "learning the rules of the game", "learning about the campaign", role playing, having fun, surviving, and **achieving story goals**, an full infographics is available on request on /osrg/. Given how crucially XP incentives direct how the game is played by both the players and the DM, this makes for a radically different game.

"AD&D" 2e supporters point out that the XP for gold rule exists in 2e. However, it's an optional rule that the DM is **advised against using**. It's part of a long list of rules that "AD&D" 2e omitted or broke only to re-introduce them as optional while criticising them. This makes it **even worse as a learning tool** for a novice DMs that wants to learn how to run an OSR game, since you are actively advised against using the core procedures that define OSR.

### Most exploration rules omitted or broken

Notably, **dungeon exploration speed** was increased by a factor of ten and **wandering monster frequency** was reduced by 70% with a warning that *even that* might be excessive. Small stuff like no rules for distracting monsters with treasure or food during chases. This breaks the way dungeons are run in AD&D irreparably.

### Hickman-style advice for DMs

The advice provided to DMs is perfectly in line with the one from the WotC editions: Drastically reduced player freedom and initiative, narrativism, railroading, magical tea party, quantum ogres, and so on.

### Core DM tools omitted

No wilderness encounter tables, dungeon encounter tables, or urban encounter tables. No tables for determining the magic items of PCs and NPCs of levels beyond the first one.

---

## Other important differences between AD&D 2e and AD&D

---

### All or most of the rules for downtime play were omitted or broken

For instance, natural healing occurs at triple speed, no rules for diseases and parasites, no forced bedrest after being reduced to negative HP (file under "game made easier for players"), no recommendation that 1:1 time when no play is happening is "best". Training reduced to an optional rule. No rules for spying and assassination.



## No tools for the "wargame club" style play for adults

No mention of players running multiple characters in the same campaign. No mention of adversarial play between players, that's actually discouraged or forbidden. No naval combat or underwater adventures section. No demi-human and humanoid racial relations table (see also Bowdlerization). No rules for slaves or peasant revolts. No mention of figure scaling rules: i.e. one figure = 10 or 20 creatures for when your party or army has to fight an army of 200 orcs.

## No tools for procedural game generation

No rules for generating dungeons, wilderness terrain, and wilderness strongholds. No random trap tables. No random dungeon dressing tables. No rules for generating NPC parties.

## Bowdlerisation

No prostitutes. Demons and Devils renamed to things I would feel dirty typing, to let your American Christian Fundamentalist mom sleep at night. No rules for gambling. No rules for random generation of entities from the lower planes (appendix D).

## Hand-holding

Poison being lethal by default removed. Reduced memorization times for spells. No rules for when, how, and whether gods and their supernatural servants grant spells to clerics based on the level of the spell.

## Combat dumbed down

No weaponless combat (grappling, overbearing and pummelling), no weapon vs AC adjustments.

## Mixed DM tools omitted that make the game weaker or blander

No rules on how to make holy water. Rules on lycanthropy reduced by 90%. No herbs, spices, and their medicinal properties. No Appendix N.

---

## Last AND least: Omitted/changed player-facing options

*Why least? These are not really the most important differences, and of course they are also the only differences that 2e fans ever mention because they approach the game the same way WotC fans do, so character building options are the only thing that they give any importance to, let alone understand.*

No Assassins, no Monks. Changed rules for multiclassing, with higher level limits and the option not to use them at all. No psionics (this also affects a bunch of monsters, that are changed or omitted). Bards are transformed into a "normal" class. A unbelievable amount of completely unplaytested optional rules and classes made available in tens of splatbooks. Specialist "Wizards" and "Priests".

---

## TL;DR: As one Anon put it...

"AD&D" 2e is a bowdlerised AD&D knock-off for the storygaming special education kids of Satanic Panic moms.