



Chapter 1 – Introduction

Welcome to **DARK DUNGEONS**! If you've got this far and you're still wondering what this is, it's a table-top role-playing game. In years past, this introduction would have tried to explain what a role-playing game is, probably with some reference to war games or improvisational acting or something like that. But this is the 21st century, and role-playing games are no longer an obscure niche. You can easily go online and find a gazillion videos discussing role-playing games and watch people playing them.

So instead, I'm going to talk a little bit about **DARK DUNGEONS** itself, and this fourth edition of the game.

The first edition of **DARK DUNGEONS** was created over a period of nine months from August 2009 to May 2010. The game was written to be an emulation of an older edition of Dungeons and Dragons. These days, most editions of Dungeons and Dragons have been made available to buy once more, but back in 2009 only the then-current edition was available to buy, and older editions had been left to go out of print.

However, Wizards of the Coast had released the majority of the third edition rules under the Open Game License, a license that allowed third parties to re-use that subset of the rules without fear of legal issues, provided that they agreed not to use the parts of those rules that hadn't been released and agreed not to make any claims that their games were compatible with Dungeons and Dragons. Various authors had already used this license to release games that took these third-edition rules and tweaked them so that they were mechanically similar to the rules of earlier editions in an attempt to keep those earlier editions alive and allow people to make new supplements for them. These games had picked up the name "retro-clone" because they were clones of older editions.

And this is where I came in. My old copy of the 1991 Dungeons and Dragons Rules Cyclopedia was falling apart, and I wanted to replace it, but the book was out of print, and second-hand copies were eye-wateringly expensive. After looking around, I realised that while there were already retro-clones of most older editions, there was no Rules Cyclopedia or BECMI retro-clone (BECMI stands for Basic/Expert/Companion/Master/Immortals because the edition was released

between 1983 and 1985 as a number of boxed sets with those names; the 1991 Rules Cyclopedia was mostly a reprint of that edition in a single book with only very minor editing and a few rules changes).

Consequently, in what I can only describe as a fit of unbridled optimism, I decided that the best course of action was that since there wasn't already a retro-clone of my favourite edition of the game I should write my own. That way I wouldn't be beholden to the second-hand and collector's market if and when I wanted to replace it. Of course, that was just the beginning, and I enjoyed the process of writing **DARK DUNGEONS** so much that I've spent most of the last fifteen years with one or more projects on the go.

Some of those projects have been new editions of **DARK DUNGEONS**.

The first of those was **DARKER DUNGEONS**. Back when I used to play using the Rules Cyclopedia, I didn't do everything quite by the book – like many people, I had my own house rules that I used. When writing **DARK DUNGEONS**, I didn't include those house rules. While I was ultimately writing the game for my own use, I was also making it available for other people to play, and I thought I should stick pretty closely to the original rules because including my own house rules might upset purists. However, those weren't the rules as I played them, so very soon after **DARK DUNGEONS** I released a modified version called **DARKER DUNGEONS** that was based on the rules I actually used at my table.

I was never terribly happy with **DARKER DUNGEONS**. On the one hand, it was the game as I actually played it, but on the other hand I was still learning about the book creation process and the book is full of editing mistakes. Still, that's the way the game remained for nearly a decade: **DARK DUNGEONS** for the purists and **DARKER DUNGEONS** for myself (and anyone else who was interested in playing with the rules I played with).

In 2020, It occurred to me that **DARK DUNGEONS** was going to be ten years old, and I decided to mark that occasion by releasing a new edition of the game. By this time, the original games were available once more, so there was no need to keep **DARK DUNGEONS** and **DARKER DUNGEONS** separate – so I

merged the two. I made a couple of other minor changes to the rules, and released the game as **DARK DUNGEONS X**, with the X standing for both “Expanded” and the Roman numeral for 10, since it was the game’s 10th anniversary.

As I write this, it is 2025, a mere five years after the release of **DARK DUNGEONS X**, so why am I releasing another edition of the game now?

Well, partly it is because I want to change the license. This edition takes advantage of the fact that Wizards of the Coast have released the 5.1 edition of their rules under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 license, and I have therefore switched to using a modified version of those rules instead of the 3.5 edition that was released under the Open Game License.

But the main reason is because mores and attitudes have been changing, and **DARK DUNGEONS**, even **DARK DUNGEONS X**, especially **DARK DUNGEONS X**, is looking very outdated. In recent years players are becoming more and more aware of the fact that a lot of the tropes in older games are problematic at best and racist at worst.

There are a lot of assumptions in older role-playing games that don’t sit well in these more enlightened times. The original games were largely based on “Wild West” settings but with a fantasy twist and had many of the unfortunate tropes of those settings. You would get the civilised folks living in their cities on the frontier of an “uninhabited” wilderness that was there to be explored, exploited, and settled.

Of course, the “uninhabited” wilderness was actually anything but uninhabited. It was full of indigenous people – but those people; orcs, goblins, and the like; didn’t count as people. They were merely obstacles to be cleared out of the way so that the land could be claimed and taken over by the “civilised” humankind. It’s all very colonialist.

To make things much worse, these orcs and goblins and similar were – and often still are – depicted as superstitious and “primitive” tribal people with shamans rather than priests. The parallels with real-world indigenous folk are clear, and that’s before we even get into the concepts of alignment and the fact that these other people are usually described as being unintelligent and cowardly yet brutish, and violent (or duplicitous, scheming, and greedy) in exactly the same manner that various real-world ethnic groups have been, and these sort of stereotypes are reinforced by giving entire “races” of people a particular alignment.

This is particularly egregious when a group is actually given a penalty to their intelligence score as part of the rules.

This is not to say that anyone playing games with these sorts of depictions and tropes is automatically racist, and nor is it saying that the writers of these games were consciously racist (although there is no doubt that some were). Indeed, I naively and unthinkingly reproduced these tropes myself in **DARK DUNGEONS**, with no ill intent, which had many peoples reduced to the status of monsters, equated their religion with shamanism (which was inherently inferior to “civilised” religions), and heavily encouraged the settling of their “uninhabited” land by player characters.

The majority of people playing fantasy role-playing games have probably never even noticed how close some of the game tropes are to real-world racist rhetoric. However, while a lot of people can play the games without noticing these problematic elements or, if they do notice, find that the presence of these elements isn’t enough to spoil their enjoyment; many people these days prefer to play games that avoid these tropes – and that’s where this new edition comes in. This new edition of **DARK DUNGEONS** aims to keep the existing rules (or at least a close emulation of them) but without the outdated tropes that have historically gone hand-in-hand with them.

The record of many games when it comes to diversity of gender and sexuality is also rather terrible. While this has not been as bad as the racial aspect often is, there have been games that made female characters weaker than male characters and many games and adventures assumed that the characters would be male and leaned into either “damsel in distress” or “evil seductress monster” tropes. There’s also the classic example of games simply assuming that their readers and their characters will all be male and exclusively using ‘he’ when referring to them. **DARK DUNGEONS** has been less bad here, but it could still do with some updates.

Additionally, it’s only very recently that we’ve started to see LGBTQIA+ characters in role-playing games. Sure, you’ve always been able to play characters how you like (albeit sometimes having to put up with resistance or abuse from fellow players), but people do like to see characters who are like themselves in their gaming material; and until recently many gamers simply did not.

While I am personally cis-het, I have LGBTQIA+ people in my home and at my gaming table, and it is important that their existence is not erased when it comes to the role-playing games they might want to play.



Okay, so this introduction has already gone on for quite a while and I therefore need to clear things up. The game is not going to be preachy and hit you over the head with unsubtle “lessons” or the like. Sure, the game intends to practice what it preaches in terms of inclusivity and avoiding problematic material and tropes, but it’s not going to keep drawing attention to itself doing that.

You may agree with everything I’ve just said, or you may disagree, but either way you should be able to judge **DARK DUNGEONS** on its merits. There’s nothing here telling you you’re a bad person or you must play the game a certain way.

Similarly, I am not picking on the D&D Rules Cyclopedia (the original game that **DARK DUNGEONS** emulates) as being some kind of terrible bastion of racism, homophobia, and misogyny. Sure, the game has its issues and problematic elements, but it’s a product of its time and it’s no worse than other games from the same era. In fact, in a lot of ways it was better than a lot of its peers. The artwork in particular was notably diverse for its time.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy playing **DARK DUNGEONS** as much as I have over the years!

Sample file



Chapter 2 – Into Dark Dungeons



DARK DUNGEONS is a large book, and can seem rather intimidating; especially if you haven't played before. This chapter explains the sort of things that **DARK DUNGEONS** characters do over the course of their adventuring careers, and how the book is laid out to mirror that story path.

PLAYER ROLES

As with most other table-top role-playing games, one of the group intending to play the game will need to take charge of running the game, and the others will each play an adventuring character.

Again, **DARK DUNGEONS** assumes you're already familiar with the difference between these roles. If not, there are many online resources and examples.

In table-top role-playing games terminology can vary and these roles can have different names; sometimes more generic and sometimes more tailored to the genre or specifics

of the game being played. **DARK DUNGEONS** uses the following names for the different roles:

- **Gameguide:** The person who creates (or adapts) the campaign setting, runs the supporting characters (non-player characters, monsters, and other bit parts), and adjudicates any rule issues that come up.
- **Player:** The people who each control a single player character who are adventurers in the campaign setting that the Gameguide is using.

RAGS TO RICHES

Adventurers start their careers as inexperienced and under-equipped novices. Over the course of their career, they will become far more powerful and capable – this capability being measured in terms of their “level”. They start at 1st level and can reach as high as 30th to 36th level before (possibly) becoming immortals – whereupon another 36 levels of experience await them.

Even at 1st level, adventurers are a cut above the normal person. Adventurers are assumed to have been trained by (or undergone apprenticeships to) older mentors. Therefore even at 1st level they have a better than average ability to fight and maybe even the ability to cast a simple spell or drive away minor undead with the power of their faith.

However, they are by no means the only people to have undergone this type of training. Town and city guards may be low-level fighters, and a village may be looked after by a mid-level cleric or druid.

Trained characters are more common in the upper echelons of society where there is less pressing need to work in a mundane job to put food on the table and where such training and experience is considered good leadership material.

Consequently, many castles, guilds, and large temples are run by experienced adventurers who have the wisdom and worldliness to know what problems need an adventurer's touch but lack the time to sort the problems out themselves.

Such characters make excellent patrons for new adventurers – and many new adventurers aspire to achieve just such a position themselves.

AN ADVENTURER'S LIFE

CHAPTER 4 – CREATING A CHARACTER takes you through the process of creating an adventuring character, and includes the special rules that apply to the different classes of character. All characters will have certain abilities such as skills and weapon feats, and some characters will also be able to cast spells. The next three chapters of **DARK DUNGEONS** describe those abilities in detail.

CHAPTER 5 – ABILITY CHECKS, SKILLS, & TALENTS contains the rules for skill use and a description of each individual skill, along with rules for using checks of ability scores in circumstances where no particular skill is appropriate.

CHAPTER 6 – WEAPONS & WEAPON PROFICIENCY contains information about what abilities a character can get with different weapons (and different levels of expertise at using those weapons).

CHAPTER 7 – SPELLS & SPELL CASTING contains the rules for learning and casting spells, as well as a description of each spell.

CHAPTER 8 – RED POWDER discusses red powder and its properties, as well as descriptions of the devices that can be powered by it when it is refined.

THE FIRST ADVENTURES

Before setting off on their first quest, most adventurers will want to spend some of their money on equipment.

CHAPTER 9 – EQUIPPING FOR ADVENTURE contains price lists and descriptions of a wide variety of equipment and services that characters may wish to purchase. Some of this – such as building castles – will be way out of the league of starting adventurers, but the basic necessities like weapons and lanterns and rope and so on will prove both affordable and essential. Starting adventurers may even wish to hire men-at-arms to accompany them on dangerous quests.

Once equipment has been bought, the adventurers are ready to go. Some stories may vary, but it is most common for low level adventurers who are just beginning their careers to start by doing small jobs in their local area such as fighting bandits or local humanoid tribes; or exploring local caves and ruins. Most of these initial jobs and quests will not involve straying too far from civilisation and will involve underground exploration.

CHAPTER 10 – DUNGEON DELVING provides the rules and guidelines for underground exploration.

CHAPTER 11 – COMBAT provides the rules for fighting whatever dangers are found in those dungeons. Of course, such fighting and exploration has its consequences. Some adventurers will be injured; others will die. But those who survive will emerge more experienced and hopefully richer.

CHAPTER 12 – GETTING BETTER provides the rules for how characters recover from injuries both magical and mundane, and even death; and provides rules for the gaining of experience and consequent increasing of levels. It also provides rules for how adventurers can spend their new-found riches on improving their abilities.

EXPANDING HORIZONS

After a few adventures, most adventuring parties start venturing further afield. Whether through increased confidence or through necessity, they will start exploring the dangerous wilderness that exists away from population centres. The dangers are greater in such areas, but so are the potential rewards. Characters may even embark on longer journeys across the planet or even to the moon or other planets via flying ships equipped with Sails of Skysailing.

CHAPTER 13 – INTO THE WIDER WORLD contains the rules for such exploration, and the rules for urban encounters for when adventurers decide to visit big cities.



POWER & RESPONSIBILITY

By the time they reach 9th-11th level, adventurers have probably made quite a name for themselves in their country, and are likely to have come to the attention of the rulers of the land.

It is common at this time (although by no means universal – some adventuring parties continue to wander for their entire career and never settle down) for such adventurers to be granted titles of nobility and be expected to help to rule and defend their country from monsters and from invading armies.

At this point, the focus of the game switches from mostly adventuring to mostly politics with the occasional adventure.

CHAPTER 14 – SETTLING DOWN contains rules for ruling domains, including managing the economy and both attracting (and managing the happiness of) populace to the area. Of course, this also involves protecting the populace from ravaging monsters and beasts.

Similarly, rival nobles (from the same country or enemy states) may do their best to make sure that the new upstarts fail. All this means that life as a ruler isn't just throwing festivals and making sure the books balance. There is still plenty of intrigue and diplomacy, and if all else fails there is always the possibility that things will erupt into open warfare.

CHAPTER 15 – WAR! contains the rules for armies and for mass battles.

A NEW PLAYGROUND

Eventually, adventurers will set their sights on higher goals than simple temporal power. Immortality is there for the taking!

Whether they have spent time ruling a domain or they have lived the life of a wanderer, particularly powerful adventurers can still find new places to explore.

The mundane world is not the only world in existence. There are other worlds out there and even other planes of existence. At high levels, adventurers can explore these planes for knowledge and riches far beyond anything available at home.

CHAPTER 16 – OUT OF THIS WORLD provides descriptions of other planets and planes and of planar travelling. Of course, travelling the planes also means that adventurers will encounter threats and dangers far greater than they would ever see on the mundane world.

Adventurers will find themselves meeting immortals face-to-face and getting involved in their plots, along with the machinations of other planar creatures.

At some point, the adventurers will want to join the ranks of the immortals themselves. Doing so is never easy, and usually involves both finding an existing immortal willing to act as a sponsor and undergoing an extended quest to prove one's worthiness.

CHAPTER 17 – REACHING IMMORTALITY provides details of this process.

A NEW BEGINNING

If everything goes right, eventually adventurers will achieve that ultimate goal – they will have become immortals. This marks a new beginning for their adventuring careers.

Although they no longer care about such mundane things as money and they are – even as newly fledged 1st level immortals – far more powerful than most mortal creatures; they are still lowly compared to the more powerful immortals and creatures of the multiverse.

Adventuring at this level becomes much more free-form, with politics and exploration both playing a part.

While most immortals enjoy playing political games, others are more interested in meddling in the affairs of mortals; acting as patrons of populations and protectors of the whole world.

Other immortals prefer to wander the multiverse and explore the new horizons that such exploring brings. Still others retire from adventuring completely, and simply live a life of comfort and hedonism free of mortal cares.

CHAPTER 18 – IMMORTAL CHARACTERS contains the rules for playing at immortal levels. Whatever an immortal's passion, immortality is the final reward for a lifetime of adventuring.

THE REST OF THE BOOK

Beyond chapter 18, the rest of the book contains resources for the Gameguide. This is not to say that you shouldn't read them if you're not going to be the Gameguide, but there is no reason for you to do so and you may spoil surprises for yourself if you do.

CHAPTER 19 – BESTIARY contains the abilities and descriptions of the various types of monster and other opponent that may be encountered over an adventuring career.

CHAPTER 20 – TREASURE contains information about the sort of treasure that might be found, and contains descriptions of many magical items that adventurers can find or even make during their careers.

CHAPTER 21 – ARTIFACTS contains rules for the most powerful of items. Artifacts can be made only by immortals and are

too powerful for mortals to safely use. That doesn't mean that mortals don't use them anyway, of course.

CHAPTER 22 – GAMEGUIDE ADVICE contains miscellaneous other advice and tips for the Gameguide that don't fit into any other chapter.

Sample file