

Old School Renaissance

Like A Fucking Boss



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The OSR

Old School Renaissance (noun) - The Old School Renaissance, Old School Revival, or simply OSR, is a movement among players of tabletop role-playing games (especially Dungeons & Dragons) that draws inspiration from the earliest days of tabletop RPGs in the 1970s.

Forty-five years is a long time. Things don't stay the same by themselves, they drift. Sometimes, that's a good thing. There's always room for progress. However, such change can also be detrimental. The way RPGs were played back in the day are, according to some, superior to what passes for contemporary game-play.

One of the many things I love about the OSR philosophy is that it's designed to save everyone time and energy. The GM doesn't have to memorize every rule and players don't have to grind their way through source material looking for the most optimal build, tinkering and tweaking for hours until their character is just right.

The following are my succinct rules (more than guidelines, but less than commandments) for running an old school type of game. If you're new to the OSR, this will be invaluable. If you're well versed in the OSR, consider this a helpful reminder. This is advice for me, as well. Before running a game, I intend to look these rules over as a refresher.

These suggestions are resource-neutral. I'm not prescribing specific tools, charts, tables, books, or systems. Use what works best. Can't find exactly what you want? Create it yourself. However, you could do far worse than the products of Kort'thalis Publishing.

Additionally, some of these rules are followed by a brief example in order to help illustrate the point.

Will some of this content be controversial? Absolutely.

Let us begin, shall we?

From now until January 11th, I'm running a Kickstarter campaign to fund my eldritch, gonzo, science-fantasy, post-apocalyptic campaign setting, **Cha'alt: Fuchsia Malaise**. Please, consider backing it!



Rule #0: Your Will Is Divine

You're the Game Master. It's your game. You're not bound by any stinking rules. Your will is divine!

Rule #1: This Is Your Game

This is your game (see Rule #0). Game Masters, don't let anyone bully you, push you around, or tell you how to run it. But don't be so prideful that you're deaf to helpful suggestions and constructive criticism.

Rule #2: Have Fun

My motto is have as much fun as possible. If you, the Game Master, aren't having fun, your game will suffer.

Rule #3: Do Not Waste Time

Time is of the essence, don't waste it. Keep things moving along. If the players or their characters are stuck and game-play has stalled, gently nudge them along. Give them prompts, and if that fails, force them to make a decision.

"The tremors are getting worse. If you don't go either left or right, the tunnel will soon collapse, rocks will fall, and you will all die."

Rule #4: Milk It!

If something is working really well, either unexpectedly or planned, milk it. Squeeze as much juice as you can, otherwise you're leaving money on the table.

Rule #5: Reactions

Not every monster or humanoid is hostile and immediately attacks. Use some kind of reaction roll to gauge their attitude.

Rule #6: Morale

Not every monster or humanoid will fight to the bitter end. Use some kind of morale roll to gauge their confidence in the face of significant casualties.

Rule #7: Minimal Preparation

The zone between total preparedness and just winging it... that's where the best gaming lives. Have an idea of what's likely to happen based on PC actions, but always be ready to improvise.

Rule #8: Keep Players Playing

Don't make players sit out of the game for longer than absolutely necessary.

Even if their character is dead or unconscious, get them back into the game within 15 minutes. If that means you have to flash-forward or an NPC becomes the player's new character, then so be it.

Rule #9: Progression

Incentivize the game play that you want to see – what gives characters experience points? Is it gold, fame, milestones, personal goals, defeating foes, exploration, power... all the above? The players knowing how their characters will level establishes the motivation of the story before the first die is cast.

Rule #10: Explain Its Value

Make sure the PCs are properly motivated by giving their characters an in-game reason to adventure. Not just XP = gold accumulated; describe how gold allows one to buy training, improve one's reputation, or paves the way for carousing (wine, women, and amateur dramatics).

Rule #11: Remind Them Why They're Adventuring

Subtly remind PCs of their goals throughout play... goals the players have chosen for their characters.

For example, "The dragon is said to be nigh unkillable, felling such a beast would leave no doubt as to your greatness in the Kingdom."

Rule #12: Inspire, Do Not Direct

Either let the PCs come to you or meet them halfway. Play it cool, don't be too eager for them to engage the world around them. Otherwise, you may come off as desperate, and the lack of verisimilitude will weaken immersion. Lure them with intrigue... amazing places, fascinating people and compelling situations.

Rule #13: Random Encounters

Have some kind of random event, wandering monster, possible NPC, or potential threat table by your side at all times. Spontaneous encounters, hazards, and weirdness adds to the unpredictability of adventuring.

Rule #14: Shorter Combat

Battles should be short rather than long. Do you want combat to be more like sport or war? The latter is favored by the OSR. A quick victory in battle is great, but winning without even having to unsheathe your sword is even better.

Imagine watching a half-hour combat in a movie. Even if it's a pivotal moment in the story and visually appealing, 30 minutes of non-stop carnage is probably too damn long to sit through. Now, consider the fact that we're only listening to the battle rather than watching it unfold in glorious technicolor. And on top of that, multiple battles are expected per session!

What to do about combat running too long?

- Use a quicker initiative system (there are literally dozens of old school options).
- Keep Hit Points at a low and manageable level.
- Watch out for Armor Class escalation. Personally, I max AC out at 20.
- Keep healing (both natural and magical) in check.
- Use morale for monsters and NPCs.
- Institute time limits when making decisions during combat. If they're not ready when you are, they have 10 seconds to decide. Otherwise, they get skipped.
- Metagame discussion ("You get them in a row, I'll shoot 'em with a lightning bolt.") is either in-character and out loud or verboten!
- Reward cunning plans made in preparation to combat.
- Reward surprise attacks (advantage to-hit, max damage, or bonus attack that first round).
- Max out critical hit damage.
- Implement explosive damage.
- Don't be afraid to use save or die, occasionally.

Rule #15: Motivate Your NPCs

When roleplaying an NPC, remember to ask yourself, "What's my motivation?"

Aside from general physical characteristics and a modicum of personality, what else do you need? Factions! Do they belong to some sort of organization, sect, tribe, cult, council, brotherhood, religion, guild, or mercenary company? If so, what's their agenda?

Rule #16: Three Strikes... You're Dead

PC death – three strikes and you're out!

Generally speaking, I only kill player-characters when three things have occurred... 1) dumb decision, 2) bad luck, and 3) unfortunate situation, such as lack of preparation (you should have borrowed the elf's ring), no one comes to your aid (where's the cleric?), the PC did nothing to mitigate his circumstances (like immediately douse his burning self with water).

If all three occur, then I don't feel the least bit bad about ending a character's life... or the whole party, for that matter. And neither should you.

Rule #17: Measured Verbosity

Verbosity. Provide all relevant information up front, and extraneous details only when asked for by the players. In the computer game Zork you needed to enter the command "Verbose" otherwise you just got the name of the room. The response for the Verbose command was "Maximum Verbosity" but even that was pretty brief.

Rule #18: Defer To Player Skill

Defer to player skill. If player skill handles it well enough, don't worry too much about what's on the character sheet. After all, the PC is merely the player's avatar in that world.

Rule #19: Describe The Action

When possible, describe attacks, maneuvers, and significant actions for both sides (PCs and others). Always embellish the killing-blow! That's the one they'll remember, the one that counts most.

Rule #20: The Trinity

Every session should have some exploration, combat, and social interaction... even if it's just a one-hour pickup game online.

Rule #21: 2 In 6

2 in 6. When in doubt, give the thing (whatever it may be) a 2 in 6 chance of occurring.

Rule #22: They Say It, They Do It

If a player says that his character does "x", then the attempt is now being made. Anyone can attempt to stop that character or action from taking place, but not retroactively interfering with the original action.

Rule #23: Keep The Mystery

Not everything has to be explained. On the contrary, preserving some mystery will strengthen verisimilitude and thereby immersion.

Rule #24: Doom

Doom! Whenever possible, foreshadow the terrible fate that will befall the PCs if continuing to pursue their present course of action.

Rule #25: Critical Encounters

Critical successes and failures happen seldom; make them significant moments of the adventure.

Rule #26: Roll Once!

Roll once! Don't continue to roll, looking for an excuse, just because you're unhappy with the result. If the situation hasn't dramatically changed, there's no call for re-rolling the dice.

Rule #27: Ruling On The Spot

Don't be afraid to make a ruling on the spot. Split-second decisions based on the relevant information at hand is part of your job.

Rule #28: Benefit Of The Doubt

If there's been a misunderstanding, give the player or players the benefit of the doubt... without ret-conning or retroactively changing the past.

For example, Balk is sure he mentioned bringing those healing potions along with him. That healing would have come in handy when Ezmerda'an died in battle earlier this afternoon. And it's also needed right now as the elf with vital information is dying. Don't edit history in order to bring Ezmerda'an back from the dead. If the player is sure he brought the healing potions along, Balk can use one of them to revive the elf.

Rule #29: Abstract Combat

Using a one-minute round gives you plenty of leeway in combat, plenty of reasonable actions are possible in sixty-seconds.

Not too long ago, I was running a 5e game. The players were shocked and appalled to learn that a desert pirate could sprint all the way to the other side of the cave (approximately 40') and shoot his crossbow at a cowering PC... or maybe he stabbed him with a scimitar. If a round was only six or ten-seconds long, that probably wouldn't have been possible, given the distance.

Rule #30: Your NPC Sucks

Players don't want to hear the extensive background or irrelevant monologue of your precious NPC. NPCs need to contribute something worthwhile... information, comic relief, local color, tension, obligation, etc. After serving their purpose, no one cares... unless a particular NPC continues to be useful to one or more of the PCs.

Rule #31: Story Emerges From Play

The story emerges from play, not the other way around.

You don't know how the adventure, even less the campaign, will end. And if you think you know, get that idea out of your head right now. The PCs make the decisions. You, the Game Master, take notes, chronicling the tales of their adventure.

Rule #32: Keep It Challenging

The PCs are the protagonists of the story, but don't forget that protagonists must deal with conflict. Challenge them, sow the seeds of suffering until victory is at hand. Theirs is not an easy road.

Rule #33: Skip a bit, brother

Not everything has to be roleplayed out. If the player is tongue-tied, but his character is an amiable bard, the player can simply say, "I turn on the charm" or "I ridicule the Bishop until he's glad to be rid of us."

Similarly, the Game Master might want to save time. "He's irritable and argumentative, but eventually returns the favor."

Rule #34: Overrule The Dice

Once per session, give yourself permission to refute, ignore, overrule, or modify a roll, score, result, or bothersome number.

"Fudging" can be a thorny subject. While not recommended, generally speaking, it can occasionally be the lesser of two evils. For instance, if used to save the life of your campaign. Keeping it safe, legal, and rare should be among a GM's best practices.

Rule #35: The Time Is Now!

Start gaming ASAP! Don't wait for the perfect hook or just the right people or the scheduling stars to align. I know several people who never actually play because they're fiddling around with some house-rule, new character class, variant systems of the same damn game, and so on. Procrastination is a disease! If you can find a handful of people to play D&D at a certain day and time, just do it.

Rule #36: Non-Standard

What happens if you have a dungeon inhabited by trolls hoarding sackfuls of gold? You have a typical scenario, and by typical I mean boring. Be unique!

It's easy to come up with standard monsters, treasures, locations, people, etc. And by easy, I mean lazy. Try to come up with at least three non-standard things per adventure... every damn time. When you add that special touch, the players will notice, making your campaign just that much more awesome.

Rule #37: Memorialize

After the session is over, put your thoughts down on paper. Record the good, the bad, and the ugly. Taking notes will help you remember, and remembering will make you a better Game Master.

If your session reports are public, they may help others... either to find a game similar to yours or plug leaks in their own game.

Credits

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