

Old School Principles for Players



Learn When To Run

📍 Old school adventures often present deadly encounters that, to the eye of a modern gamer, may seem like you're expected to beat them. Learn to dig into the fiction to see the relative power of what you're facing, and don't be afraid to cut your losses. A party that drags away one dead body is a party on their way to a Cleric, instead of on their way through a monster's digestive system.

Combat As War, Not Sport

📍 Don't expect encounters to be "balanced". Approach combat with as much trepidation and preparation as you would in real life. Nor are encounters self-contained. Think outside the box, outside the encounter area, outside the dungeon. Think like Sun Tzu. Think laterally or die.

Don't Be Limited By Your Character Sheet

📍 Rules and mechanics are only triggered by what happens as established in the conversational fiction of play. To do something, describe your character doing it; if you need to roll dice, the GM will let you know.

📍 When presented with a problem, don't expect to "use" your character's skills or abilities on it; investigate it by asking the GM questions and describing what your character tries.

📍 Don't worry much about low stats, or roleplaying to match them. If they're low, it just means you'll have to be clever, gather information, and plan ahead to avoid dangerous rolls! Or forge ahead, foolhardy, and look forward to rolling up a new character. Just try not to drag the rest of your party down with you; it's only polite.

Live Your Backstory

🔔 Don't put much work into a backstory for your characters. Their experiences in play will be more real to you and your friends than anything you write. An early death won't sting quite as much, and a survivor will have real tales to tell, and experience to take pride in.

Power Is Earned, Heroism Proven

🔔 Unlike many modern RPGs, your character starts with little power. Your meager means and abilities at first level encourage lateral thinking to get you out of trouble. Rising to a challenge (or fleeing it) means more when their life is on the line.

🔔 Likewise, if you wish to play a true hero, don't expect anyone to salute you when you first ride into town. Prove your heroism through your character's actions.

Scrutinize The World, Interrogate The Fiction

🔔 Discard any assumptions about other fantasy worlds, and be curious about the one you're playing in. Pay attention to details—about characters, the environment, social situations, and more. Take notes on them! Make maps of them! Information is leverage, my crafty friend. Those details can save your life.

🔔 If you were in a room with a heavy vase in one corner, and you wanted to know what was behind it, what would you do? Probably drag it to the side, right? Looking for an air current? Lick a finger and hold it up. Judging the slope of a floor? Spill a little water on the ground. Engage the fiction of the game world as real. Describe the real actions you take to achieve the effect you're looking for. Remember, other games may have dice rolls to do this for you—many old school games don't, so engage!

The Only Dead End Is Death

❶ That dead-end hallway may hide a secret door, or maybe there's another passage to investigate. The gargantuan monstrosity in the courtyard? Maybe you can get around it, or negotiate. A recalcitrant noble? Maybe someone knows how to get some leverage. Couldn't pick that iron door? Maybe one of those unidentified potions will help. Old school games have lots of hard blockers. When your first attempt fails, change tactics—the dead end is just the beginning of your solution. Often, digging into the fiction and engaging the world as real will open up new and unexpected avenues.

Play To Win, Savor Loss

❷ Everyone wants to succeed, and certainly everyone wants to play with friends they feel are aiming to succeed—but that may not always happen. Your characters may get turned into frog-people, lose limbs, be stricken by leprosy, turned into stone, cursed to burp up slugs, entombed in the earth for 10,000 years, or just die from being stabbed in the gut by a farmer with a pitchfork. Learn to love the disgusting, horrifying, shocking, surprising, and even disappointing ways your characters are set back.

❸ And remember, through play, a story emerges larger than any one character. You will make your mark on the world, be it an unknowingly misleading arrow scratched into a dungeon wall, or a crater where a city once stood.