

**Advanced Microlite20 OSS (Old School Style)** is a trimmed-down, subminiature version of the Primary Fantasy SRD rules (see license for more info) that has been designed to be quick and easy to play. The goal was to create a simpler game, but one where all of the resources of Primary Fantasy SRD (monsters, spells, adventures and equipment) could be used without conversion. Advanced Microlite20 OSS is a Microlite20 variant designed for old school style play with a modern game system and nearly any fantasy adventure module or setting you can pull off your shelf.

## The Rules

### Stats

There are 3 stats : Strength (STR), Dexterity (DEX) and Mind (MIND).

Roll 4d6, drop lowest dice. Total remaining 3 dice and allocate to one of the stats. Repeat for remaining stats.

Stat bonus = (STAT-10)/2, round down.

### Races

**Humans** get +1 bonus to all skills

**Elves** get +2 MIND

**Dwarves** get +2 STR

**Halflings** get +2 DEX

**Gnomes** get +1 to DEX, +1 to MIND

**Half-orcs** get +4 to STR, -2 to MIND

**Half-elves** get +1 to DEX, and +1 to MIND

**Lizardmen** get +1 to STR, +1 to DEX, -2 to MIND

### Classes

The classes are Fighter, Rogue, Mage, Cleric, Paladin, Ranger, Druid, Bard. Characters begin at Level 1. Fighters, Paladins, and Rangers are considered "Fighting Classes."

**Fighters** wear any kind of armor and use shields. They have a +3 bonus to the Physical skill and add +1 to all attack and damage rolls. This increases by +1 at 5th level and every five levels on.

**Rogues** can use light armor. They have a +3 bonus to the Subterfuge skill. If they successfully Sneak up on a foe they can add their level to the damage of their first attack.

**Magi** wear no armor. They have a +3 bonus to the Knowledge skill and can cast arcane spells.

**Clerics** can wear light or medium armor. They have a +3 bonus to the Communication skill and cast divine spells. A Cleric can Turn Undead with a successful Magic Attack. DC is the current Hit Points of the Undead. If the DC is exceeded by 10 it is destroyed. This can be used (2 + Level + MIND Bonus) times per day.

**Paladins** wear any kind of armor and use shields. They have a +1 bonus to the Physical skill and a +2 bonus to the Communication skill. They are immune to diseases and apply a +1 bonus to all saving throws (this increases by +1 at 5th level and every 5 levels on). Paladins can detect evil within 60' at will and can heal up to 2hp per level per day by laying on hands. A character must be of Lawful Good alignment to be a Paladin.

**Rangers** can use light or medium armor and can use shields. They have a +3 bonus to the Survival skill. They are +1 to hit and damage with ranged weapons (increases by +1 at 5th level and every five levels on.) and only incur a -1 to hit penalty when fighting with 2 weapons.

**Druids** wear any non-metal armor or shield. They have a +1 bonus to the Knowledge skill and a +2 bonus to the Survival skill. They cast Druid spells. Druids are immune to the spell-like effects of woodland fey. At 3rd level a Druid can pass without trace at will. At 7th level a Druid can assume the form of any small or medium sized animal up to 3 times per day. A Druid heals 2hp per level when changing back into his human form.

**Bards** wear light armor and can use bucklers. They have a +1 bonus to the Communication, Subterfuge, and Knowledge skills. A Bard can counter sound-based effects within a 30' radius. A Bard can use his song to charm person or remove fear up to 3 times

(total) per day. Beginning at 6th level, a Bard casts spells as a Druid of 5 levels lower.

### Backgrounds

Characters may select, with the approval of the GM, a one or two-word background that represents a broad base of skills and knowledge, e.g. Farmer, Merchant, Desert Nomad, Noble, Shaman, Templar, Thyatian Mercenary, Ritualist, etc. Backgrounds need not be related to the PCs class, e.g. a player who creates a deeply religious fighter skilled in the arts of vision interpretation, divination and oration might pick 'Prophet' as a background. Backgrounds may not duplicate a class.

The GM will consider the character's background just as he would the character's class when deciding if a character will succeed with an action. For example, a character with an "Engineer" background should have a much better chance of damming a creek or building a bridge over it than a character with a "Courtier" background.

### Skills

There are five general skills in Microlite20 OSS: Physical, Subterfuge, Knowledge, Communication, and Survival. Each skill has a skill bonus (starting at +0). These skills are not used directly by the players in most cases. Instead players are expected to think like adventurers, tell the GM what they are doing and the GM decides if it will succeed in the situation, taking into account the character's class and background. If the GM decides a random success chance is truly needed, he may resolve the situation with a roll of his choice or he may call for one of the following skill-based rolls:

**Primary Skill Roll:** 1D20 + Skill Bonus + Stat Bonus + Class Level if the character is attempting something directly related to their class or background.

**Secondary Skill Roll:** 1D20 + Skill Bonus + Stat Bonus + (Class Level/2, round up) if the character is attempting something only loosely related to their class or background.

**Minor Skill Roll:** 1d20 + Skill Bonus + Stat Bonus + (Class Level/3, round down) if the character is attempting something not really related to their class or background.

When the GM calls for a skill roll, he will declare the type of skill roll, which skill and stat the roll will use, and any situational modifiers and the player will make a skill roll.

For example, Climbing would use Physical + STR bonus. Dodging a falling rock is Physical + DEX bonus. Finding a trap is Subterfuge + MIND bonus. Disabling a trap is Subterfuge + DEX bonus.

Roll higher than the GM assigned Difficulty Class to succeed. Unless the GM rules otherwise, a natural roll of 20 always succeeds for a Primary Skill Roll. Suggested Difficulty Classes with Easy defined as a 50/50 chance of an average person succeeding on the first try: Easy - 10, Moderate - 15, Difficult - 20, Extremely Difficult - 25, Legendary - 30, Improbable - 35, Unbelievable - 40.

Note that there are no "saving throws" in this game; use level + STR or DEX bonus for Fortitude and Reflex saves. Saving against magic (Will save) is usually MIND bonus + your level.

**Talents:** At level 2 (and every 2 levels thereafter), characters may select one narrow area of skill where they are better than average: something they are "Good at." This talent should be either something directly related to their class or background -- or something they have spent game time and/or money learning. If the player wishes (and the GM approves), instead of selecting a new talent a talent the character is already "Good at" be improved to "Expert at" at a later even-numbered level and a talent the character is "Expert at" may be improved a final time to "Master at" at yet a later even-numbered level. The GM will consider the character's talents just as he would the character's class and

background when deciding if a character will succeed with an action.

### Magic

Magi can cast any arcane spell, and Clerics any divine spell, with a spell level equal or below 1/2 their class level, rounded up. They have access to all spells from the appropriate spell list in the SRD.

Casting a spell of any kind costs Hit Points. The cost is 1 + double the level of the spell being cast:

Spell Level	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
HP Cost	1	3	5	7	9	11	13	15	17	19

This loss **cannot** be healed by magic but is recovered after 8 hours rest. There is no need to memorize spells in advance.

Just because a character can cast any spell, doesn't mean that they should. Choose spells that suit the character. Select one 'signature' spell per spell level from 1st upward that they prefer to use over any other. These spells are easier to cast due to familiarity, costing 1 less HP to use.

For purposes of things like saves and dispelling, the Difficulty Class (DC) for all spells is:

**10 + Caster Level + Caster's MIND bonus**

**Combat Casting:** In combat, if a character is hit and takes damage (or other effect that could interfere with spell casting like paralysis) before casting a spell, the spell fizzles. This costs the caster 1 HP per level of the spell he was attempting to cast and the caster loses his action for the round. The character may expend an action point on Heroic Effort to avoid these effects and cast the spell as if the character had not been hit.

**Metamagic:** Spellcasters may select one metamagic ability from this list at levels 3 and 6. A metamagiced spell is cast at a higher HP cost: the standard HP cost for the spell plus the HP cost for all metamagic being applied to the spell. The GM has the final say as to what metamagic effects do or do not make sense to use with a particular spell. Multiple metamagic effects can be applied to a single spell; however, each metamagic effect after the first adds an additional +1 to the HP cost of the spell.

*Empower Spell* - All variable, numeric effects of an empowered spell are increased by one-half. Saving throws and opposed rolls are not affected, nor are spells without random variables. An empowered spell adds +4 to the HP cost of the base spell.

*Enlarge Spell* - You can alter a spell with a range of close, medium, or long to increase its range by 100%. Spells whose ranges are not defined by distance, as well as spells whose ranges are not close, medium, or long, are not affected. An enlarged spell adds +2 to the HP cost of the base spell.

*Extend Spell* - An extended spell lasts twice as long as normal. A spell with a duration of concentration, instantaneous, or permanent is not affected. An extended spell adds +2 to the HP cost of the base spell.

*Widen Spell* - You can alter an area shaped spell to increase its area. Any numeric measurements of the spell's area increase by 100%. A widened spell adds +6 to the HP cost of the base spell.

### Combat

Hit Points = STR Stat + 1d6/Level. If HP reach 0, unconscious and near death. Further damage directly reduces STR. If that reaches 0, death. A character heals either 1 STR point or twice his level hit points per full day of total rest. A night of rest will allow a character to recover 1 Hit Point from damage and all Hit Points used to cast spells. STR lost to damage must be recovered before hit points from damage can be recovered.

**Surprise:** At the beginning of an encounter, roll 1d6 for each side. On a roll of 1-2 a side is surprised and may not act at all in the first round.

**Initiative:** Roll d20 + DEX bonus for initiative order. Everyone can do one thing each turn; move, attack, cast a spell, etc. The GM may choose to allow some combined actions, like a charge attack, to be one thing.

Melee attack bonus = STR bonus + Level  
Missile attack bonus = DEX bonus + Level  
Magic attack bonus = MIND bonus + Level

Add attack bonus to d20 roll. If higher than your opponent's Armor Class (AC), it's a hit. A Natural 20 is an automatic hit and if the roll would normally hit, the hit is a critical doing maximum damage. A natural 1 always misses.

Fighters, Rangers, and Rogues can use DEX bonus + Level as Melee attack bonus instead if wielding a light weapon. Fighters and Rogues can wield 2 light weapons and attack with both in a round if they take a -2 penalty on all attack rolls that round. Rapier count as light weapons, but you cannot wield two rapiers at the same time.

There are no "iterative attacks" in Advanced Microlite20 OSS. However, for fighting classes if the total melee attack bonus is +6 and the attacker drops or slays a foe, he is granted one additional attack against another opponent in melee weapon striking distance that round. As long as the Fighter, Paladin, or Ranger is dropping foes, he can continue attacking others until one does not fall to the might of his weapon.

Add STR bonus to Melee damage, x2 for 2-handed weapons.  
Armor Class (AC) = 10 + DEX bonus + Armor bonus.

### Special Combat Situations:

*Opportunity Attacks:* Anyone not surprised and with a ready weapon who is not already involved in a melee combat gets a free attack on opponents trying to move past them – this attack is in addition to their normal attack for the round. If the attack is successful, the opponents takes damage and can move no further that round.

*Ranged Attack into Melee:* Shooting or throwing into a crowded melee is not a good idea, there's a 50% chance you'll hit a friend instead of an opponent. Fighting classes may take -4 to hit to avoid hitting a friend.

*Dodge:* A character who is not making an Active or Full Attack may forgo his next attack at any time and dodge out of the way. Roll 1d20 + DEX bonus + Physical Combat Bonus. The total is the character's effective AC until his next attack. If it's lower than his real AC, well, the character zipped when he should've zagged. The GM may modify the roll by +2 or -2 (or more) to reflect the terrain and cover of the area.

*Aid Another:* A character who can make a melee attack on an opponent engaging an ally in melee combat can help that character attack or defend by distracting or interfering with an opponent. Make an attack roll against AC 10. If successful, the ally gains either a +2 (+1 at levels 5, 10, 15, etc. for fighting classes) bonus on his next attack roll against that opponent or a +2 (+1 at levels 5, 10, 15, etc. for fighting classes) bonus to AC against that opponent's next attack (aiding character's choice), as long as that attack comes before the beginning of the aiding character's next turn. Multiple characters can aid the same ally.

*Grapple:* A character can make a grapple attack on an adjacent target. A successful attack roll means they are then grappled with

their target. When grappled, both the attacker and the defender's AC becomes 10 and neither can make move actions. When grappled, the defender can't make normal actions and must make opposed rolls (1d20 + PCB) against the attacker to attempt to break free. As long as the defender is grappled the attacker can make automatic unarmed attacks on the defender.

**Knockout Blow:** A character can attempt an armed melee attack against an adjacent creature to stun them. On a successful hit the target is stunned one minute for every point the attacker rolled higher than their defense. Rogues add their level in minutes to this time.

**Morale:** While a few monsters, such as mindless creatures, are fearless and will fight to the death, most monsters have a strong desire to survive and will not continue to fight when the battle is going against them. They will instead seek to retreat, to flee, or even to surrender. The GM decides when monsters abandon the battle and retreat, based on the situation and the monster's intelligence.

### Other Hazards

**Falling:** 1d6 damage per 10', half damage on DEX save. DC=depth fallen in feet

**Spikes:** add +1 point to falling damage per 10' fallen, max +10

**Poison:** STR save to avoid or for half, depending on poison.

Effect varies with poison type.

**Extreme Heat & Cold:** If not wearing suitable protection, STR save once every 10 minutes (DC 15, +1 per previous check), taking 1d6 damage on each failed save.

### Action Points

All characters have 1 action point per character level. Actions points may be used to simulate a heroic effort by a character or to simulate a lucky break. Action Points recover 1 per day of total rest in safe surroundings.

**Heroic Effort:** Each action point spent on heroic effort allows the player to roll a 1d6 and adjust any single die roll affecting the character or made as a result of the character's actions in the character's favor by the amount rolled. The action point must be expended before the die roll to be adjusted is made. An action point may also be spend on Heroic Effort to allow a spell-caster to continue to cast a spell if hit during casting.

**Luck:** Spending one action point for luck will cause a minor bit of good luck to come the character's way. Spending two action points for good luck will cause a major bit of good luck to come the character's way. In both cases, the GM decides exactly what the good luck is, but it should be helpful in a minor/major way to the character's immediate situation.

**Second Chance:** Spending one action point allows the player to reroll any roll he just made, but he must accept the result of the new roll even if it is lower. Exception: Using a second chance for a failed "save-or-die" roll changes the result to the minimum needed for success.

**Shake Off Fatigue:** Recover half your lost hit points instantly. This counts as an action.

**Strike Now:** The character can take his action right now instead of waiting for his normal strike speed position to come up. This cannot be used to cast a spell over 3rd level or if the character has taken a defensive Combat Stance for the round (Full Defense or Active Defense).

### Level Advancement

Characters get Experience Points (XP) when their party defeats monsters. (Note that monsters can be defeated without being killed.) Experience Points (XP) = Hit Dice of defeated monsters. Add +1 for each doubling of the number of foes. e.g.: 1 kobold (a 1 hit die monster) = 1 XP. 2 kobolds = 2 XP. 4 kobolds = 3 XP, 8

kobolds = 4 XP etc. Add +1 or +2 XP (GM's discretion) if the foes have dangerous special abilities. Characters who do not participate in the encounter in some way do not get XP for it.

Characters also earn a GM-assigned amount of experience points for defeating traps, solving puzzles, excellent roleplaying, and the like. The GM should assign XP depending on the situation (usually from 1 to 5 XP). Characters can also lose up to 5 XP for generally ignoring their alignment or other very poor roleplaying.

Individual characters can also earn experience points from spending money found in treasures (or taken from monsters) in totally frivolous ways (e.g. wine, women, song, donations to a temple without getting anything in return, generic "training," etc.). A character earns 1 XP for each 100gp so spent.

Add up the Experience Points (XP) of every successful encounter you take part in plus any earned from GM specials and treasure spent. When the total is equal to 25 x your next level, you've advanced to the next level. Reset the total XP to 0 after advancing.

Each level adds:

+1d6 to Hit Points

+1 to all attack rolls

+1 to a single skill bonus (player choice)

If the level divides by three (i.e. level 3,6,9,etc.) add 1 point to STR, DEX or MIND.

If the level divides by two (i.e. level 2, 4, 6, 8, etc.) select a new Talent.

Fighters gain +1 to their attack and damage rolls at levels 5, 10, 15, etc. Paladins gain +1 to their saving rolls at levels 5, 10, 15, etc. Rangers gain +1 to their attack and damage rolls with ranged weapons at levels 5, 10, 15, etc.

Clerics and Magi gain access to new spell levels at levels 3,5,7,9,etc.

**Example:** Four newly minted second level adventurers have just completed a dungeon adventure. They each have 36 XP and need 75 XP to reach third level. Their expedition was extremely successful. They defeated 22 XP worth of monsters and earned 7 XP from traps and other GM specials for a total of 29 XP each. The party's cleric earned 4 XP for great roleplaying while risking her life to save the party from an angry spirit. The party also found and recovered 2900gp in treasure from the dungeon. That's 725gp each. The cleric decides to donate the entire sum to her temple, and earn 7 more XP. This gives her 40 XP for a total of 76 XP. She advances to 3rd level and resets her XP to 0. The other party members earned 29 XP each for a total of 65 XP each. They remain 2nd level.

### Monsters

Use the monster descriptions from the SRD, ignoring unneeded stats, feats, etc. To create new monsters quickly: Pick a name, assign a level, hit dice = level, hit points = 1d8 per level, magic save = 10 + level, all attack bonuses = level, damage = 1d8 for ordinary claws, bites, and weapons, 2d8 for large maws, giant clubs, 3d8 for dragon bites and the like, AC = armor equivalent; pick special abilities as the level increases. Special attacks act like magic attacks against an appropriate defense. Intelligent monsters may have classes at the GM's option. If needed, assign stats to suit. Equip and add abilities as required.

**Monster Reactions:** Some monsters (like skeletons guarding a tomb) may always attack. In cases where the reaction of the monsters to the party is not obvious, the GM may opt to make a reaction roll for the monsters by rolling 2d6 and adding the MIND bonus (and any other appropriate modifiers) to the roll and

consulting this table.

Adjusted Reaction Roll	Result
2 or less	Very Unfavorable
3-6	Unfavorable
7	Neutral/Uncertain
8-11	Favorable
12 or more	Very Favorable

Interpretation of the results is left to the GM, however, these general principles may prove helpful. Very Unfavorable means the monsters will most likely attack unless the odds are overwhelmingly against them. They will not help the characters. Unfavorable means the monsters are hostile and might attack unless they are given a good reason not to. They will not help the characters. Neutral means the monsters are unsure of the party. They are not likely to attack immediately, but are not friendly or helpful. Favorable means the monsters are willing to listen and are open to negotiation. They might be willing to be slightly helpful. Very Favorable means the monsters like the characters and are willing to be somewhat helpful and are open to working with the party to mutual advantage.

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The author would like to thank the following individuals who sponsored the production of Advanced Microlite20 OSS and Microlite75 by making donations to the RetroRoleplaying Cancer Fund to help pay the huge cancer bills treating my wife's Stage 3 Oral Cancer without insurance ran up.

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## Donate to the RetroRoleplaying Cancer Fund and Get some PDF Goodies

Many Microlite20 gamers know that Randall Stukey (of RetroRoleplaying.com), the author of Microlite74, is trying to raise funds to pay the bills from his wife's oral cancer treatments. Randall and Donna are some of the 40 to 50 million people in the US who do not have health insurance nor did they qualify for government aid as they live in Texas and have no children. Donna (successful so far) cancer treatments have cost over \$110,000. While some of this has been absorbed by hospital foundations and the like, they still owe a lot of it. You can donate to the RetroRoleplaying Cancer Fund (via PayPal) and help them pay their bills. Everyone who donates any amount at all get a password giving them access to a number of special downloads. Some of the currently available downloads include the following (See <http://www.retroroleplaying.com/content/retroroleplaying-cancer-fund-special-downloads> for more information).

- Pdf copies of the two issues of The Grimoire Randall published in the late 1970s (which Randall blogged about here: The Grimoire #1 and The Grimoire #2)
- pdf copy of The Second Grimoire of Pharesm the Bright-Eyed, a set of house rules for a BECMI campaign Randall ran at a game shop in the mid-1980s.
- A copy of the Player's Introduction to the Fourth Campaign Arn (from about 1984).
- Microlite74 2.0 Special Edition -- a 60-page PDF designed to be printed in booklet format from Adobe Acrobat -- with artwork is by Håkan Ackegård and incorporating the rules from the supplement, giving you all the rules currently available for Microlite74 in one booklet. The text has been reformatted into a single column in a large enough font to easily read.

A copy of the Microlite75 Special Edition and the Advanced Microlite20 OSS Special Edition will also be available to donors as soon as the games are completed and Special Editions for donors are produced. To get access to these downloads, help Randall pay the cancer bills by sending a donation in any amount -- small or large -- to the RetroRoleplaying Cancer Fund via Paypal link below.

**SPECIAL NOTE:** For a limited time (until the final versions of Microlite75 and Advanced Microlite20 OSS are released, probably in Summer 2010) donors can be listed as Sponsors in the final editions of both Microlite75 and Advanced Microlite20 OSS as explained below:

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## Notes on “Old School” Play

While Advanced Microlite20 OSS is designed using tried and true “D20” systems filtered through the Microlite20 rules, it is designed for a completely different style of play than many players who started to play in the last 20 years or so may be used to. This section will give a brief overview of “old school” play.

### What is “Old School” Play?

There are two major styles of roleplaying games. The first (and older) style says “Here is the situation. Pretend you are there as your character, what do you want to do?” This style has been superseded over the years with a style that says “Here is the situation. Based on your character’s stats, abilities, skills, etc. as listed on his character sheet and your knowledge of the many detailed rules of the game, what is the best course of action to solve the situation?” Old school play strongly favors the first style and frowns on too much of the second.

Here are some major points where old school play is different:

**No Skills:** Unlike most modern RPGs, there aren’t any skills in Advanced Microlite20 OSS, not even the streamlined four skills of Microlite20. Players are intended to have their characters act like adventurers. So don’t search your character sheet or the rules for the perfect solution in Microlite20 OSS. Instead, you just tell the GM what your character is trying to do. If you need to keep a door open or shut, you might tell the GM your character is using a spike to keep the door open or closed. A ten foot pole is your friend for checking for traps. Searching a room means looking in and under objects, not rolling a skill check. While this may seem strange at first, you will quickly learn to appreciate the freedom it gives you. No longer are you limited to the skills and feats on your character sheet, you can try anything your character should be capable of trying. You might not succeed, but the rules generally will not stop you from trying.

**No Assumption of “Game Balance”:** Old style game sessions aren’t about carefully balanced characters (who are all able to shine equally at all times) who only run into situations carefully designed by the GM to be beatable by the characters presently in the party and to provide treasure that fits their current level. Instead, part of player skill is learning to evaluate situations so situations well over the party’s current abilities or which will waste the party’s resources for little gain can be avoided. Don’t assume that you can beat every monster that you encounter, running away from monsters too tough to handle can mean the difference between character survival and character death. You can also get creative in how you defeat monsters. Perhaps those goblins you bypassed could be talked into (or tricked into) attacking that giant you know you can’t beat, perhaps killing it for you or at least softening it up so your party has a chance of defeating it and living to tell the tale. Also remember that treasure can be turned into XP, even if you can’t kill the monsters, perhaps you can still acquire some of their treasure. Part of the skill of playing “old school” style is coming up with creative solutions when a direct attack is likely to fail.

**It’s Not All About Combat:** Many modern fantasy RPGs have made combat the star of the system, combats in these systems are time-consuming and very crunchy with rules for everything. Microlite20 avoids this by having a fast-playing abstract combat system. Advanced Microlite20 OSS takes this one step further, combat isn’t intended to be the main source of fun in the game. The game is as much about exploration and treasuring finding as it is about combat. Sure, you are going to have to fight things to explore and find treasure, but always remember that combat may not be the best or safest way to handle every situation. Think before you rush into combat. After all, it’s not the only way to earn a good pile of experience – and monsters don’t have to be killed to be defeated (and get XP for them).

**Forget “Rules Mastery”:** Player skill in “old school” style games isn’t about mastering the game rules so you can solve any problem by knowing the right combination of rules from 20 different rule books. Microlite20 is designed to be rules light and Advanced Microlite20 OSS tries to stress this even more by encouraging GMs to make rulings on the spot taking into account specific circumstances instead of trying to hunt up special cases in the SRD or a stack of optional rule books. It’s faster and helps players immerse themselves in their character and the game world instead of in rule books. Both players and GMs should remember that these rules are a tool for the GM. If something herein does not work right in your campaign, change it. The object is to have fun, not be a slave to rules or to players who think being a rules-lawyer is the way to get ahead. In many roleplaying games, the Rules As Written (RAW) are often considered sacrosanct or at least somehow better than those a GM can come up with himself. This is not true of Microlite20 OSS.

### Styles of “Old School” Play

If you read some “old school” blogs, forums, and web sites, you might get the impression that there is only one “old school” style of play: a style with expendable player characters who spend all their time in dungeons designed in the style of the old “Tomb of Horrors” module where an adventuring party is only one slipup away from death. This style of play is often shown in early modules.

What most people forget is that these early modules were designed for tournament play where the party that lasted longest and made it deepest into the dungeon was the winner. While a few gaming groups did run their regular campaigns like this and enjoy it, most people did not enjoy such games and the GMs who ran them were often referred to as “Killer GMs” (who often found themselves without players). Instead most home campaigns were a mixture of the following four styles – some campaigns stressing one or two over the others.

**Power-Gaming:** Many players start out playing in this style. Many soon get bored with it and add more and more of other styles. A power-gaming campaign is all about character power. They are known by their class, level, special items, and amazing powers and deeds. (“I killed the Demon King with my 15th Level Fighter/Magic-User/Druid. It only took two hits from Thor’s Hammer to knock him out. Then I cut off his head with my vorpal blade.”) There is often a lot of player competition for the most powerful character in campaigns that stress power-gaming. A lot of people look down on this style, but it can be a lot of fun to play a pure power-game in a group of players who all like the style.

**Wargaming:** This was probably the style old school rules were originally written for. The wargaming style of play is a competition between the player group and the GM. The GM sets up tactical battles, puzzles, and the like and the players solve them for treasure and experience. Fudging die rolls and ignoring rules (either for or against the players) is frowned upon as it detracts from the challenge and fun of the adventure. Characters in pure wargaming campaigns often were expendable and had little personality or goals (beyond staying live and getting rich) as a character with such might be tempted to do things dysfunctional to survival. Published tournament dungeons like Tomb of Horrors could be considered examples of extreme forms of this still. Once the RPG hobby became known outside of the minis and board wargaming community, pure forms of the wargaming style quickly became uncommon.

**Role-Playing:** A pure role-playing campaign is almost the opposite of a pure wargaming campaign. Player skill, tactics, and rules aren’t really important. What is important is the player’s character and that character’s life in the game. In a pure role-playing campaign, players create the personality of their characters in great detail and players generally have a large

emotional investments made in them and do not consider their characters expendable. Players tend to have their characters act within their personalities and within the beliefs they're supposed to hold – even when doing so is not the best thing to do at the time within the game. The object is to live your character's life in the campaign world. You "win" by having your character achieve his goals, goals which may or may not have anything to do with the game's goals of exploring and accumulating treasure and experience points. The modern computer game *The Sims* is an example of this style of play.

**Story-Telling:** While all campaigns tell a story after-the-fact (that is, you can tell a story based on the characters actions in the game), in a story-telling campaign, the GM has worked out a story in advance and the player characters are the protagonists. The campaign world usually has a detailed background and back story behind it. Knowing this background may be more important than knowing the rules. Some pure story telling campaigns are little more than single-line railroads where the characters play their almost pre-scripted parts in the story. In other cases, things are more free-form with story flow and events created by interactions between the GM's basic outline of story events and the actions of individual characters during the campaign. Some people consider the more pure forms of story-telling campaigns boring straight-jackets while others love the idea of being a major part of a real story.

These four major styles of play appeared early in the history of role-playing games. They were first mentioned in a general circulation publication in Glenn Blacow's article "Aspects of Adventure Gaming" in *Different Worlds* #10 (the October 1980 issue).

The important thing to take from this section isn't the four styles or their labels (as there are other systems for describing this with their own labels), but the idea that there were many different styles of "old school" play back in the "old school" days – not just the single style stressed in "old school" blogs, forums, and web sites. Don't let those sites make you believe that you aren't playing old school right if your campaign isn't strongly in the wargaming camp. Most successful campaigns back in "old school" days were a mixture of all four major styles – and a heaping helping of minor styles.

### **Advice for the New Old School Gamemaster**

If you are comfortable running a rules-light game like standard Microlite20, you'll probably have no trouble running Advanced Microlite20 OSS as you have already learned to run a game without having hundreds of pages of rules detailing how to handle every situation that might possibly arise in the game. You've already learned to just make a ruling that you think fits the situation and keep the game moving.

The greatest change between Microlite20 and Advanced Microlite20 OSS is the modification of character skills. If you are used to just allowing players to just say "I'm searching the room. What do I find?" and make search skill roll or just say "I'll try to persuade the baron to loan us a catapult." and make a persuade skill roll, running without skill rolls is going to require as much change to your thinking as it will to your players' thinking.

First, you need to get your players to tell you what their characters are actually doing in the campaign world, instead of talking in terms of what skill they are using. Then you need to learn to listen to what they say and decide if their description of what they are doing a) would most likely solve the problem, b) wouldn't have a chance of solving the problem, c) might not immediately solve the problem but would provide more info that would help solve the problem, or d) would not definitely solve the problem but has a fair chance of doing so. Only d would require a die roll.

Let's take checking a chest for traps as an example. Get the players to describe in general terms how they are going to check the chest for traps. Note general terms are enough, the idea is to see what the characters are doing, not to require them to describe every single muscle and eye movement they make. Having to "click on one exact pixel on the screen" to succeed is boring and frustrating in a computer game, the verbal equivalent of it is even more frustrating in a tabletop. Don't fall into the trap of doing it as it turns players off fast.

Let's say a player says "I'll look the chest quickly over for obvious traps, paying special to the keyhole, clasp, and anything that looks out of the ordinary. I'm not touching it yet."

If the chest had a poison needle near the clasp or some holes for poison gas or needles to shoot out of, this should be enough for the character to notice it without a roll, even if he isn't a Rogue or the like. However, if the chest is set to explode (or shoot daggers out of the opening when opened, such a search is not going to discover the trap – again no matter what the character's class or background as such a trap isn't visible from the outside. If you are feeling generous, you might have a Rogue make roll and if she makes it tell her player that while she doesn't see a trap, something still doesn't seem right about the chest.

If the character had said he was then poking the chest with a pole instead of rushing to open it, he might hear something strange if the chest had the above-mentioned dagger trap. Of course, unless he is a Rogue or has some strange background, chances are he would not associate the noise with a trap, but rather just that there was something loose in the chest. Again, you might give a Rogue a roll, especially an experienced Rogue.

As this example shows, it really isn't hard – unless you choose to make it hard. It's just different. After a few session both you and your players will find that it really isn't as hard as it looks.

Some players, however, really want die rolls. Because of previous bad experiences with poor GMs, they just can't trust the GM enough to handle some decisions being made without die rolls. If your players are like this, you can use "skill" rolls as a safety net. The players will still have to describe what their character does to solve the problem just as above. Once the player describes what his character is doing, the GM calls for a class/background based "skill" roll as described in the skills section of these rules. The results are determined by your opinion as GM of the action described and the skill roll. There are basically two situations:

In the first case, you feel that the player has a good plan that should likely succeed. Therefore it will succeed regardless of the result of the roll, but how well it succeeds is determined by the skill roll. A failed skill roll is a minimal success, the character succeeds, but just barely. A successful skill roll means the character's plan succeeds without any major hitches.

In the second case, either the player obviously knows less than his character does about the situation or just comes up with a bad idea that you feel is unlikely to work. You let the skill roll decide the result. A failed roll means the plan fails, while a successful roll means the plan somehow worked after all, but probably not perfectly.

Players who refuse to even try to come up with some type of rational statement about what their character is actually doing but just want to let the skill roll decide automatically fail.

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