

Magician Editions: The Various Editions of Dungeons and Dragons

by Joel Fox

Dungeons and Dragons, the premiere pen-and-paper fantasy game, was originally released in 1974 by Tactical Studies Rules (TSR). The rules were ill-defined at best and most of the grunt work was left to the dungeon master (or DM), whose job was to simulate the realms explored, enemies encountered, and people met. As such, a great many supplements to these basic rules—which can be split into two types (kits and core books)—were produced so as to fill in the gaps in the game and ease the burden on the DM.

Kits were third-party publications which presented rules not approved by TSR but still endorsed by them. Core books, however, were produced by TSR affiliates and were commonly accepted as actual rules for the game. The addendum of these rules became such common practice that multiple publications, including *Strategic Review*, *Dragon*, and *Dungeon* were put in place simply to keep players aware of all the new changes.

Then, after a while, it would be determined that the current rules were obsolete. Using previously produced material for the game as a guide, including both core books and kits, TSR (and then Wizards of the Coast when the franchise was purchased) would virtually recreate the entire system. This is how new generations of the game came into being.

Technically speaking, Dungeons and Dragons (or D&D) has been through five editions, and many sub-editions, in its 32-year history: the original edition, the Advanced original (commonly called 1st edition), Advanced Dungeons and Dragons (2nd edition), Dungeons and Dragons (3rd edition), and Revised Third (3.5 edition).

As such, there have been a great many changes made to the rules. The question of interest, however, is why some of these changes were made. Throughout this exposition I will attempt to address what changes were made between the five editions, why these changes were made, and what effect they've had on the pen-and-paper community in general.

Original Edition (1974)

The original D&D game was in all reality a supplement to the *Chainmail* tabletop game, which was created in 1971. In tabletop games, miniature pewter figurines are used to represent the positions of characters and troops, and distances are measured in inches (as representative of the table itself). Chainmail was something of a skirmish game, as with most tabletops: a given scenario is created, the units placed on a special board or combat grid, and the battle fought.

However, this game, also created by TSR, was lacking the connections *between* these fights and the development of player's characters (or PCs). The fantasy community, enthralled by such tales as *The Lord of the Rings*, greatly desired the opportunity to role-play their characters. So, in an effort to please their audience, the rules for Original edition Dungeons and Dragons were drafted.

The initial rules were somewhat derivative of Chainmail: the combat system, for example, was taken directly from it. The advancement of PCs, general DMing ideas, adventure and campaign theory, and some technical data (magic items, traps, monsters, etc.) were produced in the initial book set.

Over the next two years a number of supplements were produced just to get the game started. At the start, there were only three alignments (chaotic, neutral, and lawful) existed, just a few classes, and everything was sketchy at best and convoluted at worst. Nearly all of the material produced in this period was then included in the revised Original, normally called 1st edition.

First Edition (1977)

First edition carried little over from Chainmail, but much over from its own earlier supplements. Some of the larger revisions included the expansion of the alignment scale: both the ethics axis (the chaotic, neutral, and lawful of Original edition) and a new morals axis (including good, neutral, and evil) were now included. This is when the distinction between good and evil was made: most usually, the PCs were good and the monsters, demons, and villains controlled by the DM were evil.

In terms of books, the system was stratified more logically. The material presented in the three Original edition books was arranged somewhat haphazardly: PCs and magic in one book, monsters and treasure in another, and environments plus general DMing ideas in the last. Now, however, one book had everything the PCs needed to know, one had most everything the DM needed to know, and the last was an encyclopedia of monster statistics for the DM to consult.

The Chainmail combat system was completely abandoned, and a more strategic (rather than tactical) system replaced it. Hit locations were a more specific assignment of damage, causing the target to be affected in specific ways when hit; this tactical element was removed. Mostly it was considered extraneous and somewhat too technical, and it was thought to dissuade people from playing. This concept—editing because an idea was too technical—plays a very important role in the revision of this game.

This removal of hit locations, as well as of many other tactical elements, caused something of a split in TSR. Gary Gygax, the man best known as the creator of D&D, was on the more complex and tactical side; people like Dave Arneson and Tom Moldvay on the less complex and strategic side. Therefore, two parallel sets of rules were produced: the *Basic* set, backed by Arneson, and the *Expert* set, backed by Gygax.

The Basic set was more strategic and generally easier to play, whereas the Expert set was more tactical and generally harder to play. People new to pen-and-paper games took quicker to the Basic set, as it allowed them to more easily perform their actions and focus more on the role-playing aspect. Up until the advent of D&D, the best form of expression in regards to fantasy was the Society for Creative Anachronism (founded in 1966), whose members regularly participate in renaissance fairs and other such nostalgia to this very day.

The Expert set was more popular for two groups. The first group was people who wanted to stay true to the Original edition: there has always been, and always will be, a number of people who don't endorse the revisions of D&D. In terms of this change from Original to First edition, those who liked the old tactical ways kept with the Expert set.

The other group who played Expert set was those who played other pen-and-paper games which were emerging around the same time as D&D. As they were already familiar with the concept of pen-and-paper play, they had little trouble adapting to what was sometimes called a radically difficult game to master.

Dungeons and Dragons is known as the metonym for fantasy gaming, especially in the pen-and-paper capacity; as such, it has set the standard for all fantasy gaming. Most other pen-and-paper, including *Tunnels and Trolls* (1975), Palladium Fantasy Role-Playing Game (1983), and Generic Universal Role-Playing System (commonly called GURPS, 1986) use D&D as a model, and most console and computer fantasy gaming is based on it as well.

This split between the Basic and Expert sets is very interesting to consider from an editing perspective, if only because internal disagreements are rarely considered as a reason for change. This lateralization of the game fundamentally altered it: the creative genius of TSR's design staff was divided between the two editions. As a result, certain elements that were present only in Basic were *not* present in Expert, and vice versa.

When enough supplemental books were published, the Expert set group of TSR decided to advance to another edition, Second. Those supporting the Basic set, however, followed their own path and released updated versions of their core books in sets over the next two decades. The rules didn't greatly change for the span of the Basic set; few new rules were added as time progressed, most detailing information for players of higher level than previously specified. However, when TSR was purchased by Wizards of the Coast in 1997, the Basic set was discontinued and its printing was halted.

Second Edition (1989)

The First edition books had grown quite numerous: three Monster Manuals (detailing monster statistics), a half-dozen complete campaign settings (including *Greyhawk*, *Forgotten Realms*, and *Ravenloft*), and countless miscellany. As such, when the advancement to Second was made, there was a great deal of base material with which to work.

The concept of proficiencies was introduced and split into two categories: weapon proficiencies, which represented a PC's skill with different weapon types (sword, axe, etc.); and non-weapon proficiencies, an optional rule concerning trade tasks or crafts, such as weaving or boating. Weapon proficiencies were essential for the equipping of one's characters, but non-weapon proficiencies were generally not used, as their rules were complex and often unrewarding.

The previously cumbersome combat rules were revised yet again. Any previous ties to Chainmail were severed as distances were now referred to in virtual feet, rather than literal inches. A new system of combat rules, based around a concept called THAC0 (to hit armor class 0), came into being. This system, while still somewhat obtuse, was definitely less complex than the previous system involving innumerable tables and multiple die rolls per attack. In addition, the concept of the critical hit was introduced, which was a somewhat simplified version of the hit location of Original edition.

In fact, Second edition in many ways moved away from the reference of tables and more towards the standardization of roll types in general. Most chance events were now based on either an icosahedral (20-sided) or two decahedral (10-sided) dice roll. The 20-sided rolls, or d20 rolls, represented more common tasks, such as attacking. The two 10-sided rolls, or percentile rolls, represented less common tasks, such as performing out-of-combat errands or checking to see whether or not a spell would backfire.

There was a stipulation of a character's attributes, representing their strengths and weaknesses in the physical and mental realm. Six stats—strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma—were defined and given functions. If a character wanted to endure a tiresome ordeal, for instance, they would make a constitution check (a d20 roll). If they wished to persuade an opponent to spare their lives, they would make a charisma check.

The nature of these checks were to roll the d20, subtract the 'attribute bonus' (which reflected the stat's value), and see whether the result was lower than a static number. They were similar in mode to the THAC0 rolls, and operated in a similar fashion. These attribute bonuses were also used in the calculation of THAC0 rolls (strength for mêlée attacks and dexterity for ranged attacks), and also in the use of non-weapon proficiencies. Monsters, however, possessed only the intelligence stat, indicative of their cunning as an opponent.

It is at this point that the morality of the game must be addressed. As alignment had been better explored with First edition, allowing PCs to be both good and evil, the question of ethics was raised. The ever-present stigma regarding Dungeons and Dragons, and of fantasy gaming in general, stems from this period.

Due to a series of unfortunate events including many youth suicides and crimes, D&D was somehow linked to Satanic worship. The Original and First editions of the game included statistics for those termed 'outsiders' by the game's mechanics: these outsiders included basically creatures from other planes of existence, such as from various mythological heavens and hells.

These outsiders included the demons, devils, fiends, and even angels from Judeo-Christian scripture. During the investigation of some of the suicides, the rulebooks for D&D were found, and the statistics for these outsiders were seen. The idea was conjured that the game inspired these youths to kill themselves in Satanic rituals, which in all actuality is a total farce: D&D was simply being used as a scapegoat to shift the blame from neglectful parents.[†]

Regardless of the validity of these claims, TSR was put under great pressure by the government, the police, and the parents of the deceased. As such, in the Second edition of D&D, many elements were removed, though some later made appearances in kits. All mention to outsiders was cut, as well as some other less theological creatures.

Also removed was the option to play an evil character. Text in the *2E Dungeon Master's Guide* says that it is not within the capacity of the PC heroes to be evil, and if they do evil they should be smitten by just and noble deities. Some character classes, including the assassin, barbarian, and even the monk (which was not inherently evil, but instead Oriental) were removed from the game.

As magic is also associated with the occult, many spells were cut from the game as well. Particularly devastating offensive spells, those dealing with the human soul, and those that summoned powerful creatures were removed from the books. Highly powerful magical items called artifacts were removed as well. These tasks were in an effort to protect the company from rumors that players were attempting to cast these spells themselves or to steal valuable items thought to be artifacts (though it did little to protect TSR in the long run).

In fact, around the genesis of Second edition in 1989, a time of troubles began for TSR. In addition to the numerous accusations of occultism and youth suicide, the fantasy genre was rapidly expanding. Not only were the other pen-and-paper games (q.v.) vying for players, but collectible card games (CCGs) as well as computer and console games were appearing as well.

Magic: The Gathering, the current premiere CCG, started in 1993. The relative low cost of the game, paired with its simple rules, pulled away an entire generation of D&D players. Console games such as *Final Fantasy* (1987) and *Dragon Warrior* (1989) for the NES, and later *Secret of Mana* (1993) and *Chrono Trigger* (1996) for the SNES, provided straightforward—and more importantly, non-technical—alternatives to D&D.

At this point TSR became somewhat desperate, and began what is now known as a very shameful chapter in D&D history. In an effort to raise their failing profits, they released many extraneous and somewhat content-lacking supplements, much to the chagrin of veterans and new players alike. They started many copyright infringement lawsuits with competing fantasy-gaming companies, though they won few. Lastly, they raised the prices of their products to obscene levels, driving away all but the true (but also wealthy) fans.

These efforts were in vain, however. In 1997, TSR was on the verge of bankruptcy when they were purchased by Wizards of the Coast (the makers of *Magic: The Gathering*). Being a friendly local and humble company, Wizards kept most of the staff of TSR, and even rehired some of the designers that TSR had fired in its times of financial difficulties. However, Wizards too was bought out in 1999 by the toy giant Hasbro.

Hasbro allowed most of the Wizards staff to remain, and as was their corporate policy kept Wizards an independent company. Though owned by Hasbro, Wizards remains mostly autonomous to this very day. Now with heavy corporate backing, the new makers of D&D devised a grand redesign of the game, which was known as Third Edition.

Third Edition (2000)

Third edition was vastly different from Second, in almost every way. The very nature of the game was changed from a subtractive mode to an additive one. The complex and sometimes confusing THACO was replaced with the attack roll, in which a few easily referenced modifiers were added to a d20 roll: if the roll exceeded the armor class of the enemy, the hit connected.

This additive attitude permeated the entire game. Non-weapon proficiencies, now called skills, came back and were fully integrated into the game, no longer an optional rule. Each skill was tied to a specific attribute (intelligence tied to crafting skills, strength to swimming, charisma to diplomacy, etc.). Again, a few easily referenced bonuses were added to a d20 roll and checked against a difficulty class (or DC). The DC of the check reflected the complexity of the action, with low DCs representing simple actions and high DCs representing complex ones.

The idea of DCs replaced many of the tables and complicated rules from previous editions: now, instead of having to look up a specific table when performing an action, the DM could just determine a DC based on their own judgment. Not only were these DC's used for skills, but also for saves against harmful effects.

Saves in Second and previous editions were based around the exact nature of the harmful effect. In Second edition for example, there were five saves against specific effect types (such as petrification or paralysis). In Third edition, there were only three saves, each representing attacks against in a specific arena: fortitude (against the body), reflex (against a character's ability to dodge), and will (against the mind).

The simplification of saves is a prime example of the attitude of Third edition: the 'tightening up' of rules and the standardization of policies. As the saves simplified, so did the dice usage strategies: almost all rolls were based on the d20 roll.

Many facets, variable in previous editions, were now standardized in Third. The accumulation of experience points (which, in enough number, allowed PCs to gain a level) and the ability modifier table (in the past, strength used a wholly different system) for example became completely standardized. Monsters now had the same six attributes that PCs had, as well as all the other statistics (armor class, attack bonus, etc.); this made it more possible to have monsters with character levels, whether as more deadly villains or as creative PCs.

This standardization made each class somewhat less special in that some of their abilities were turned into skills, rather than abilities unique to a specific class. The abilities to pick locks and disarm traps, for example, were once solely available to characters of the thief class; however, in 3.5 the skills Disable Device and Open Lock were made generally available for all characters (though certain skills were more easily attained for specific classes).

Added were feats, which allowed for a greater customization of one's character. In the past, a particularly arduous action as performed by the PC was up to the DM's discretion; with the inclusion of feats, this system was standardized. A wide range of feats became available, from complex combat actions (such as disarming one's opponent) to out of combat tasks (such as making magic items). PCs are even given the option to design their own feats, bringing customization of characters to a whole new level.

In fact, Third edition was the most customizable edition yet. It became much easier to flesh out one's character, as there was a very wide list of equipment to use, skills to have, feats to perform, and spells to cast. Moreover, if what a player was looking for wasn't available, whether in the core books or in other supplements, there were rules included as to how one would make new rules.

One of the most customizable ideas yet was that of the prestige class. Prestige classes were similar to normal classes, but characters had to meet certain prerequisites before they could gain levels in them. Anyone could take a prestige class if they met the prerequisites, regardless of race or class. However, such as with skill standardization, some classes were better at becoming certain prestige classes than others (like wizards became archmages easier, and rogues became assassins easier).

Since Wizards had the backing of Hasbro, they didn't particularly worry about being the target of lawsuits from overzealous parents or the authorities anymore. So, many of the things removed from Second edition returned: outsiders, some spells, and some classes. In fact, many new elements that the schoolmarm didn't approve of were added, including a whole new slew of demons and questionable character classes (including the devilish warlock).

Perhaps the greatest change from Second the Third edition was the inclusion of the d20 System and the Open Gaming License (OGL). The d20 system standardized the game around the use of the 20-sided die, and uses it for most rolls. While other dice are still used, the d20 is used most. This focus around the use of the d20 has made the game very modular; the classic proto-fantasy setting is not a prerequisite anymore, and almost any setting can be applied to the d20 system.

The OGL is a contract specified by the Wizards company that allows anyone to publish supplemental books and material for use with Dungeons and Dragons. A document called the System Reference Document lists the basics of the game, and became open for anyone with a creative mind to use and elaborate upon.

With the inclusion of the d20 System and the OGL, a great swelling of new material for Dungeons and Dragons has sprung up. Entire companies exist, such as *Sword and Sorcery Studios*, who solely produce supplementary material for D&D. With such a wide variety of materials out there, there is definitely something for everybody.

When all of these Third edition elements came together—the modularity, the ease of play, and the simplification of what is commonly thought of as a complex system—they produced a very lucrative and enjoyable game. Player ranks exploded, and profits skyrocketed: D&D was seeing a bigger player following than ever before in the history in pen-and-paper games.

Since the internet was a much more available resource for this edition of the game than previous ones, a large role-playing community sprung up. Many forums were devoted to the game itself, and even more to pen-and-paper games in general. This open and honest community produced a good deal of feedback and ideas about the game, including what they thought should be changed and how they would change it.

Wizards, being a wise corporation, listened to these comments, and in 2003 released a new edition which took into account all of the player feedback they received in the 3-year run of Third edition.

Revised Third Edition (2003)

The changes made to Third edition were not big enough to warrant a change to a new integer; as such, Wizards called the new edition 3.5 instead of Fourth. Revised Third is not greatly different from Third edition, and most of the changes were either balance issues or minor clerical changes. There are two things to note in this revision however: the pronoun use and a return to roots.

While D&D did have an extremely large player base, almost all of it was male. The original Third edition books were more suited to accommodate female players than previous editions, but apparently Wizards felt that a larger female player base was more important. In an effort to draw in a larger female crowd, most of the pronouns in the 3.5 core books are feminine.

This effort has produced mixed reviews. Many fans approve of the new pronoun use, as well as the inclusion of more female characters in the books. Some, however, feel that this is a paltry attempt to draw in more female players, and an ineffective one at best. As a result, some people have stopped purchasing new Revised Third edition books in attempt to sway Wizards to return to its 'assumed he' roots.

There was something of a return to roots in Revised Third edition, especially in terms of combat. The *Player's Handbook* now includes extensive detail about the use of figurines in combat, especially in terms of a combat grid. How creatures above average size fit on the grid, how explosions travel around corners, exactly how you can move diagonally, and other technical data about the combat was included. This return to roots was greatly appreciated by very veteran players who were around for the Original edition, and for players new to the game, as the combat grid can be quite confusing, and the schemata provided can help make it more bearable.

Dungeons and Dragons has seen many editions, with a variety of reasons for each edit. Internal conflict within the company produced a split which may have deprived some gamers of great material. An unfortunate false tie to the occult made the game lose both popularity and a plethora of material. Financial trouble made TSR sacrifice it's sterling quality and settle for the publication of lower-grade material.

But of course, not all the edits of the game were negative. Over the decades the game has become simpler and simpler, allowing a wider audience to take part in the fun and majesty, while at the same time losing none of its quality. After being bought out, which would normally be viewed as a curse, the game no longer needed to fear lawsuits or unwanted attention.

Dungeons and Dragons has always been the classic role-playing game. There was no greater moment in fantasy gaming than when Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson sat down in their basement and came up with an adventure for the imaginative player in all of us. Though the specifics may have changed, though strife may have struck the creators, though tragedy may have befallen TSR, D&D remains the pinnacle of pen-and-paper gaming, and will continue to set an example for all other fantasy games until Tenth edition, or One-Hundredth.

[†] For a more in-depth analysis of the stigma surrounding the game, including its so-called ties to Satanism, see *Debate & Discussion: Role-playing's Greatest Riddle* (2005) by Joel Fox

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