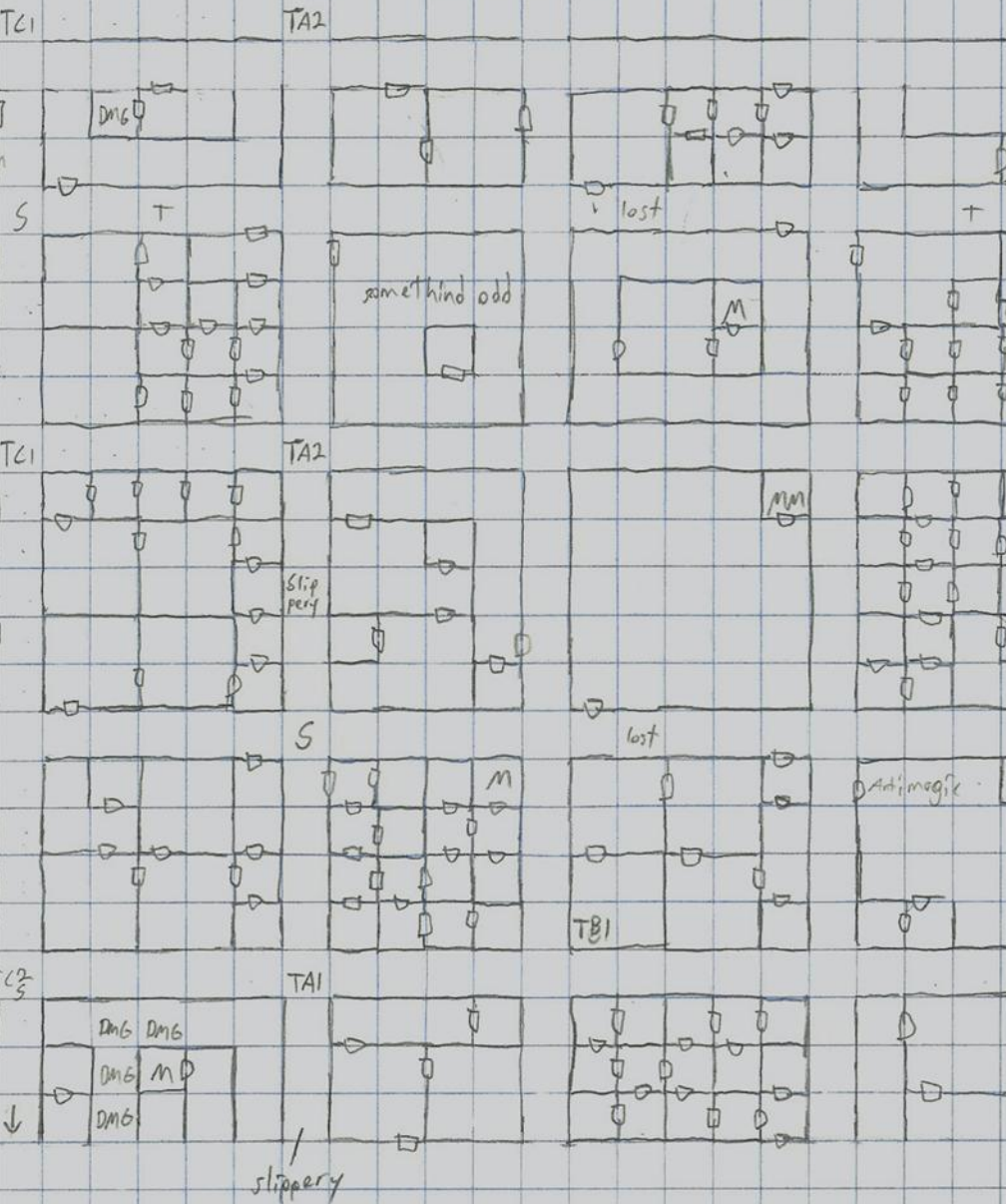# Antiquated Game Player

A magazine for the old school, vol I.

W elcome to the inagural isssue of *Antiquated Game Player*! What you hold in your hands now—or more likely view on your monitor or tablet—is nothing less than a labor of love from me, your humble editor and author. A software engineer by trade, I am certainly not a professional writer or editor. And by no means am I a journalist! What follows is a very personal work, but one that I have tried to corral into a fairly narrow set of parameters. In these pages I will discuss the types of games, both electronic and paper-based, that were once center pieces of the industry, back when the industry was much smaller and the target audience was niche hobbyists of one stripe or another.

Before I introduce the theme of this issue, I'd like to make a note concerning the name of this publication. Specifically, I intentionally use the phrase "game player" in favor of the more commonly used "gamer". Choosing to play games as a hobby does not have to be a lifestyle defining decision as the designation gamer implies. I fully expect my readers to have diverse interests outside of games, just as I do.

Putting my nominal ramblings aside, I'm pleased to introduce this first issue of *Antiquated Game Player*, the theme of which is Computers and Dragons. As a game player I was weaned on Dungeons and Dragons, but growing up in rural North Carolina I was a member of that lonliest of species, the solo role player. Fighting Fantasy game books and other solo adventures received a lot of my early attention but once I discovered computer RPGs—from the pages of Dragon Magazine—my de facto dungeon master was electronic. For me and others who experienced traditional RPGs before electronic RPGs they are inextricably linked, for the latter is really nothing but a simulation of the former. This perspective is lost to younger generations of game players and maybe even game designers, but it is a central conceit shared by many if not most of the earliest computer game developers. In this volume I'll touch upon the subject with a treatment of dungeon crawlers and reviews of two AD&D games by SSI. I'll also discuss the evolving concept of ownership as the games market transitions from physical to digital. And finally I'll close with what will be a recurring column on pen and paper role playing games.
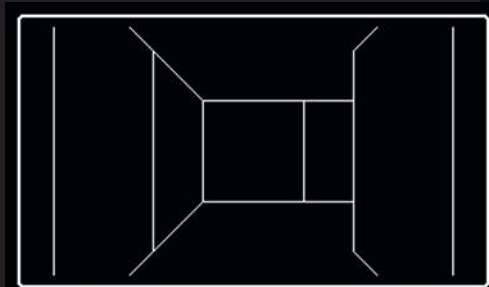
I hope you enjoy Volume I of *Antiquated Game Player* magazine.
- Jonathan Simpson @MagisterLudi11

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A Taxonomy Of Dungeon Crawlers

Originating in the mid to late 70s on mainframe computers, the dungeon crawler was one of the founding genres of electronic games. As such, the dungeon crawler sprung not from computer games, but from the pen and paper role playing games which preceded them. The idea of exploring a dungeon for fame, glory, and treasure was a cornerstone of even the earliest role playing games. In fact, the very idea of what we now think of as a dungeon, a rather loose interpretation of the literal medieval dungeon where prisoners were held beneath a castle, was a core concept of the proto Dungeons and Dragons played by Dave Arneson and his gaming group(Arneson used a modified version of Gary Gygax's Chainmail rules for medieval wargaming and would later collaborate with Gygax in the development of Dungeons and Dragons).

Dungeons in the early days of role playing were large, labyrinthine affairs with multiple levels. They were filled with tricks, traps, secret doors, teleporters, and many other features that would be familar to a player of modern dungeon crawlers. Even the idea of random encounters, the backbone of so many electronic rpgs, was present in the form of wandering monsters. Early games of Dungeons and Dragons focused heavily on the exploration and logistical aspects of dungeoneering. Like real life explorers, the terrain itself was perhaps the greatest adversary. This focus on exploration is what distinguishes a dungeon crawler from other games that, while also set in dungeons, have a different focus from the early dungeon crawls of pen and paper role playing games.

Of the early dungeon crawlers, the two most influential are Rogue and Wizardry. Released in 1980 and 1981 respectively, these two games exemplify the first split in the family tree of dungeon crawlers. Rogue was different enough from Wizardry, and significant enough in its own right that

it spawned what most would consider a full-fledged genre apart from the rest of the dungeon crawlers. I speak, of course, of the roguelike. Given this, and that the roguelike branch probably experienced less evolution over time than the Wizardry branch, I consider the roguelike an offshoot of the dungeon crawler and distinct and well-defined enough to be an independent genre. I will not discuss them in detail in this article.

To bolster my argument on the separation of roguelikes from other dungeon crawlers, it will be illustrative to examine the play mechanics of a game of D&D. In a typical game there are multiple players working together as an adventuring party and one referee called the dungeon master. When exploring a dungeon or other locale, the dungeon master details the environment from the players' characters' perspective(i.e. first person). The players are generally given time to discuss, make decisions, and decide upon their characters' actions. The game world is essentially paused while the players think things over, making game time distinct from real time. In most cases a game session will last for several hours at least, and a campaign involving the same players and game world can last many sessions. During the campaign the players will not be in a constant state of adventure. There will probably be numerous expeditions taken to explore a given dungeon or area, with

time needed between them to regroup, resupply, train, etc. Years of game time can elapse in a single campaign.

Those familiar with Wizardry will notice that the above description is quite similar to that game. Wizardry is played with a party of characters, from a first person perspective, with turn-based combat and exploration. Multiple sorties will be taken to explore the same dungeon, with each delve hopefully leading the characters further in as they map the terrain, overcome hazards, and gain more experience. A visit to town to resupply and heal will mark the end of each such excursion. Compare this with Rogue, in which the player controls but a single character and where the game is played from a third person perspective. Rogue is also turn-based, but the big difference is that in Rogue a game is a single expedition. When the player leaves the dungeon, the game is over and that character is retired. The game's goal must be completed in one shot, and since the dungeon is randomly generated each time, each game starts afresh from a blank slate.

So, with the roguelikes out of the way, how do we categorize the remaining games which might be considered dungeor crawlers. First, a dungeon crawler must be a role playing game. There are many examples of action games which involve the exploration of dungeons, such as Gauntlet to name

one classic example, but dungeon crawlers are generally classified as a sub-genre of RPGs(for a discussion on what classifies as an RPG, see Matt Barton's excellent book Dungeons and Desktops). Second, as explained above, a dungeon crawler is a game that is centered around exploration of one or more "dungeons". I use the term dungeon here in the loosest possible sense. A game with both dungeons and significant above ground wilderness areas isn't automatically disqualified if the wilderness is presented in a similar fashion as the dungeons. The relevant matter is the manner in which the environment to be explored is presented. It must be maze-like, with multiple paths, and have obstacles to overcome besides adversarial enemy encounters.

With those two critieria in mind, what popular dungeon games are excluded from the ranks of dungeon crawlers? One category is the character build and loot focused games like Diablo. Most of these games are less about exploring dungeons and more about killing the things that live in them and taking their randomly generated loot. The original Diablo is closer to a true dungeon crawler than its two sequels, but still not close enough to qualify in my mind. Bioware's infinity engine
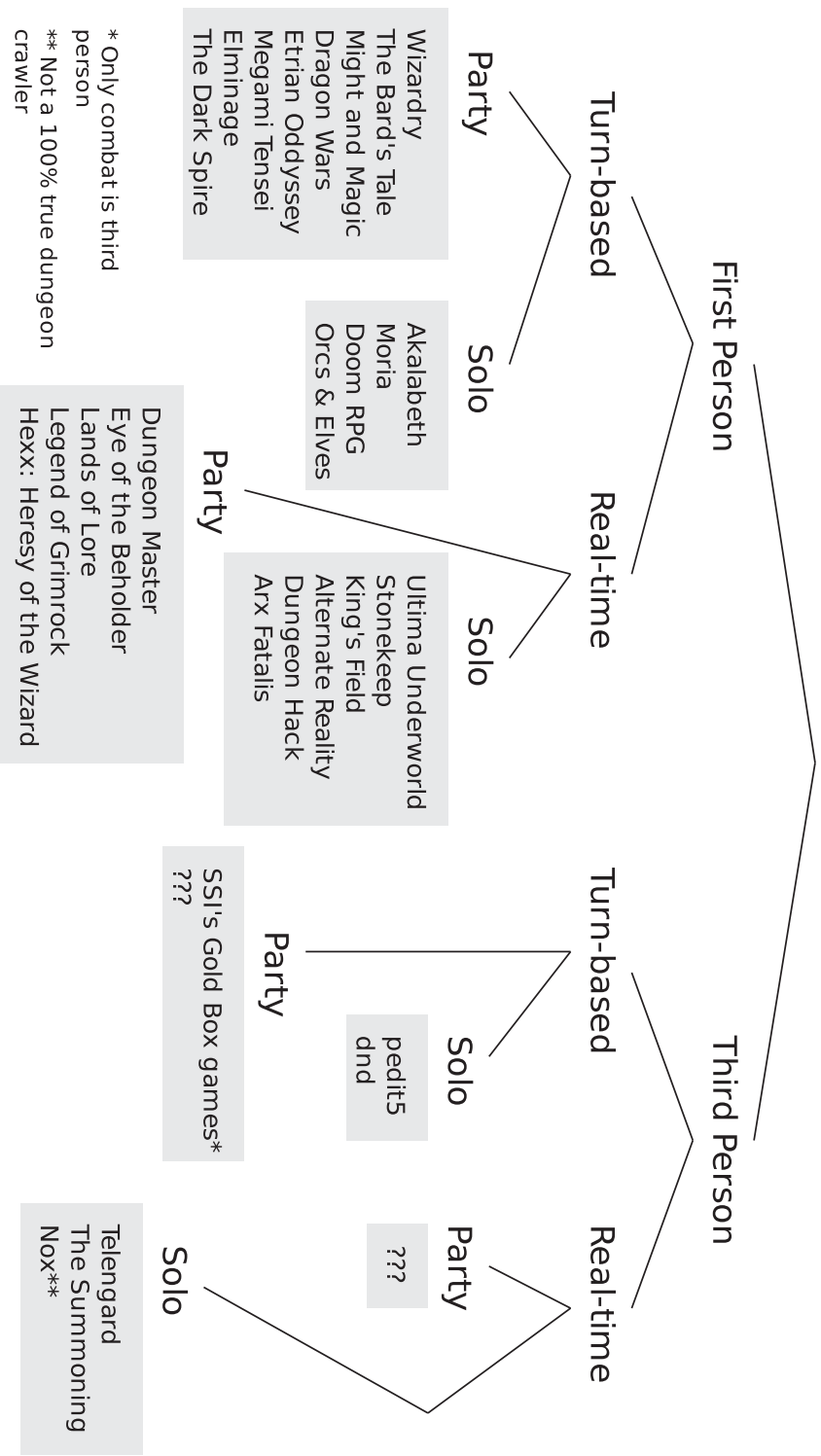
games also fail to make the cut. The dungeon exploration is just too diluted by their other emphases, like narrative development and tactical combat. Likewise, the Ultima series, with two important exceptions, is not centered around dungeon exploration.

Now we come to the actual taxonomy of those games that do meet the criteria. Since dungeon crawlers are a genre whose membership is defined by possession of a pair of broadly defined game mechancis, role playing and exploration, it makes since to categorize them mechanically. A taxonomy based on theme, setting, etc, would clarify little, since those elements are orthogonal to those that define dungeon crawling. A better taxonomy would consider how the actual dungeon crawling is implemented. To accomplish this, I have identified three areas of differentiation:

1. Perspective(First or Third person)
2. Simulation of time(Turn-based or Real-time)
3. Number of actors under player control(Party-based or Solo)

If each of these three areas are divided into two broad categories, that gives us eight basic types of dungeon crawlers. Let us discuss them now.

The Dungeon Crawlers

First Person

Turn-based

Party
- Wizardry
- The Bard's Tale
- Might and Magic
- Dragon Wars
- Etrian Oddyssey
- Megami Tensei
- Elminage
- The Dark Spire

Solo
- Akalabeth
- Moria
- Doom RPG
- Orcs & Elves

Real-time

Party
- Dungeon Master
- Eye of the Beholder
- Lands of Lore
- Legend of Grimrock
- Hexx: Heresy of the Wizard

Solo
- Ultima Underworld
- Stonekeep
- King's Field
- Alternate Reality
- Dungeon Hack
- Arx Fatalis

Third Person

Turn-based

Party
- SSI's Gold Box games*
- ???

Solo
- pedit5
- dnd

Real-time

Party
- ???

Solo
- Telengard
- The Summoning
- Nox**

* Only combat is third person
** Not a 100% true dungeon crawler

First Person, Turn-based, Party Crawlers (Wizardry-likes)

These are the quintessential dungeon crawlers, best exemplified by Wizardry. As noted above, they are probably the closest to an actual pen and paper dungeon crawl in mechanics. Of course, most are greatly simplified compared to a pen and paper game, especially considering that even many modern games are clones of a game released in 1981. The first person perspective is the most effective at engendering a sense of trepidation as a hostile environment is explored, especially in the pre-automap era! Most of these games emphasize tricky dungeons with lots of puzzle-like elements. Random monster encounters are also the norm, but not a requirement.

Wizardry is the template, and many stick close to it. The later Wizardry games are considerably more complex than the early ones, though. Along with The Bard's Tale and Might and Magic, they featured numerous dungeons and dungeon-like wilderness areas and towns. Wizardry 8 and Might and Magic 6-9 also had hybrid real-time systems.

Dragon Wars   **Dungeon Master 2**

First Person, Turn-based, Solo Crawlers (Akalabeth-likes)

It is difficult to find examples of this type, since most turn-based crawlers are party-based. Having only a single character under the player's control could allow room for greater mechanical complexity or more detailed character development, but most games of this sort are simpler, fast-paced affairs.

Akalabeth is one example and is one of the oldest dungeon crawlers, predating even Wizardry. Doom RPG and Orcs and Elves are fast paced games developed for mobile phones. Some of the early mainframe RPGs may also qualify, such as Moria on the PLATO system, although it is quasi-real-time and multiplayer.

First Person, Real-time, Party Crawlers (Dungeon Master clones)

Dungeon Master is the founding father of this category, and all of its descendents that I know of hew fairly closely to its model. Controlling a party of characters in real-time as they are attacked from potentially all sides in a 3D environment can be a harrowing experience, and all of the Dungeon Master clones play up that aspect. Most don't even allow the player to pause the game for inventory management! In Dungeon Master, the player can't even see what is hitting him as he frantically opens the inventory screen to find that much needed healing potion. Despite the action oriented and click heavy nature of the combat, however, many of these games also emphasize environmental puzzle solving.

Pen and Paper Dungeon Crawls

One sad fact for historians of role-playing games is the lack of game materials from the early dungeon campaigns. Probably the best documented is Gary Gygax's Castle Greyhawk from his Lake Geneva campaign. Unfortunately, even for Castle Greyhawk, there is very little material available in published form. Most of what we know about it comes from recollections of Gary and his players, much of which was first written down years after the fact. Most of the published adventure modules from the early days of Dungeons and Dragons were shorter scenarios designed for tournament play, quite different from the megadungeons we know were the focus of so many early games of D&D. *(continued)*

First Person, Real-time, Solo Crawlers(Underworld-likes)

With only one character to control, the action is a bit less hectic than in the Dungeon Master clones. As a result, many of these games take a more sedate approach. Character and inventory management can be more intricate and exploration is usually emphasized over action.

Ultima Underworld is the classic example, but Alternate Reality: The City is among the earliest.

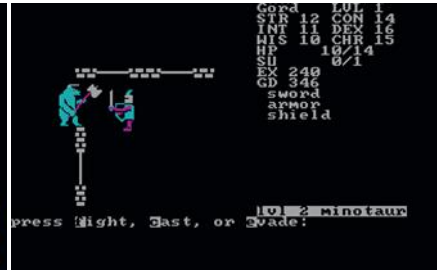# Third Person, Turn-based, Party Crawlers(Tactical Crawlers)

In general, there aren't many third person RPGs that meet the criteria for dungeon crawlers. Of those that are also turn and party-based, none that I can think of emphasize exploration over tactical combat or narrative. An overhead, third person view is quite popular among RPGs as a whole, but perhaps for historical reasons, it isn't common among dungeon crawlers. The success of Wizardry and other first person games may have led developers creating thematically similar games to ape their mechanics as well. There is certainly potential here to create an interesting and unique dungeon crawler.

One challenge all overhead view dungeon crawlers face is how to create the sense of danger and mystery inherent in a good dungeon-as-adversary. It is much easier for the player to keep his bearings from a static, overhead viewpoint, and without the risk of getting lost, the dungeon loses much of its power. And if some form of line-of-sight visibility determination isn't made, the player literally knows what lies around the next corner. As we will see, not many games have risen to meet these challenges.

SSI's gold box games, while using a first person view for dungeon exploration, use a tactical third person view for combat.

The Summoning   **Telengard**

Third Person, Turn-based, Solo Crawlers(dnd-likes)

This category would include roguelikes if I didn't consider them significant enough to stand apart from other dungeon crawlers. What we are left with are games similar to Rogue that aren't roguelikes. This includes "rogue-likes" without randomly generated levels, an item identification sub-game, etc.

Dungeon games that predate Rogue and the establishment of its conventions, like dnd and other mainframe games, are one set of examples.

Third Person, Real-time, Party Crawlers(Reflex Crawlers)

If Dungeon Siege weren't all about tactical combat, it might make a good example of a Third Person, Real-Time, Party Crawler. As it is, though, it is more of a game about fighting off wave after wave of attacking monsters. But an interesting dungeon crawler could be constructed with a similar engine if the player is given something else to do in the dungeon besides fighting. In the absence of any real precedence, I'm dubbing this category the Reflex Crawlers because any real-time, party-based game is probably going to be a click fest.

(continued from previous)
Some of the largest and best old school dungeons to be published back then were from Judges Guild, Caverns of Thracia and Tegel Manor to name just two. Of course, these were still relatively small compared to the 10+ level dungeons alluded to in random encounter tables and dungeon design guidelines from the early rule books. In my opinion, the best published example of a bona fide megadungeon from the early days is Ed Greenwood's Ruins of Undermountain boxed set for AD&D 2nd Edition. Dating all the way back to 1975, Undermountain was the first dungeon in Greenwood's Forgotten Realms. As published, I doubt that Undermountain has a whole lot in common with the original version, but it maintains the structure of a megadungeon and is the only official D&D product I know of to do so besides Greyhawk Ruins, an unauthentic depiction of Castle Greyhawk.

Third Person, Real-time, Solo Crawlers(Telengard-likes)

As with the first-person, real-time crawlers, reducing the player's management responsibilities from a party to a single character slows the pace of combat down considerably. Reflexes become less of an issue, expanding the potential audience for the game. Exploration and puzzle solving can be conducted at a more relaxed pace.

Nox, by the developers of the Lands of Lore series, is a good example of what can be done within this framework. Although I feel it is a bit linear for a dungeon crawler, it still shows how to create a dungeon that is threatening in its own right, and not just a place where monsters are killed and treasure obtained. Other examples include Telengard, Darkspyre, and The Summoning.

Ownership in the Digital Age

Given the recent controversy over Microsoft's plan—now thankfully aborted—to implement restrictive Digital Rights Management(DRM) in its Xbox One console, it is worthwhile to conduct a thorough examination of the concept of ownership as it applies to electronic media. As the 20th century fades into the past, and software makers and media producers strive to overthrow the old paradigms and business models, the concept of ownership as it applies to our everyday lives has become increasingly vague and tenuous. What does it mean to own something? Do you own the ebooks residing on your kindle? Do you own the hundreds of megabytes of data that are stored in your name on a half dozen corporations' servers? There has never been a better time to engage in a philosophical discussion of ownership.

In 1961, the legal philosopher and lawyer A.M. Honore published a seminal piece on the concept of ownership in liberal societies. Honore defines ownership as a combination of 11 elements. Some elements can be considered rights, some are powers, and others are the duties or responsibilities which go hand in hand with ownership. The following is a brief summary of Honore's 11 components of ownership(with all the loss of nuance one would expect from such a terse summarization):

1. The right to possess
The most fundamental right to the concept of ownership, the right to possess allows for exclusive physical control of a thing, inasmuch as can be allowed by the nature of that thing, including the right to remain in possession. In the case of intellectual property, this is the right to exclude others from the use or benefits of the thing(i.e. patents).

2. The right to use
The right to use a thing at one's discretion, not including those uses which fall under the next two rights(three and four). Otherwise only limited by number nine below.

3. The right to manage
The right to decide how and by whom a thing shall be used, including lending, sharing, etc.

4. The right to income
Income could be derived from charging others for the use of a thing or simply as a byproduct of the nature of the thing itself.

5. The right to the capital

The right to the consumption or destruction of a thing. The right to use or even waste a limited resource. Also the right to transfer by exchange or gift.

6. The right to security

The right of an owner to maintain his rights in the future. Obviously can be limited in cases such as bankruptcy, etc(see number 10, Liability to execution).

7. The incident of transmissibilty

A good example of this is inheritance. The incident of transmissibility allows for the owner to choose who should receive ownership of his estate upon his death(via a will).

8. The incident of absence of term

The absence of term provides no duration on the owner's other rights.

9. The prohibition of harmful use

An owner's use is limited by the rights of others.

10. Liability to execution

A restriction to ownership allowing for the owner's interest to be taken due to debt, etc.

11. Residuary character

The existence of rules governing the reversion of lapsed ownership rights.

In light of Honore's definition, let us examine exactly which of these elements of ownership we secure when we purchase a traditional disc-based, offline, console game.

Rights Held For Game Discs

1. The right to possess is held when considering the physical media only. The owner of the disc does not have exclusive control over the bits contained on the disc. This distinction is maintained for the other 10 elements as well.
2. The right to use is held. The limitations implied by #9 prevent the owner from copying the disc, however, as the owner does not own the digital contents of the disc itself. Backup copies for personal use exist in a very darkly shaded area of gray.
3. The right to manage the physical media is also held.
5. The right to the capital is held for the disc itself.
8. The ownership rights held for a physical game disc do not expire in most cases.
6,7,9,10,11. All are pretty standard components of our legal system.

Rights Not Held For Game Discs

4. The end-user license agreement for games typically precludes the right to income. The owner of the disc cannot lend the game out for money unless he owns a copy specifically licensed for such.

As you can see, in the simple 20th century scenario, most video game owners can count on nearly full ownership rights. The owner of a Playstation 2 disc of, say, God Hand can count on the complement of rights listed above. But God Hand is also available as a digital download through Sony's Playstation Network. What rights would the owner of this version of God Hand receive through his purchase? In this case, the game is tied to the account it was purchased on instead of to a physical disc. The account itself then has to be tied to the physical devices it is used on. Only two playstation systems can be tied to one account at any given time. The right to use is thereby strictly limited. The right to manage is also limited, because there is now no way to share or lend God Hand without sharing account information or the playstation device God Hand is tied to. Furthermore, the right to the capital is lost as well. There is no way to exchange God Hand or to sell it. If the owner read and was embarrassed by IGN's 3 out of 10 review, he wouldn't even be able to strike God Hand from his purchase history. God Hand is forever linked to his account. As for the rights to security and absence of term, I'm not sure I am equipped to answer. A careful reading of the Playstation Network Terms of Service would be required. In any event, the account holder has no direct control over his possession and contined ability to access God Hand. If Sony removes God Hand from its service, the account holder's only recourse is to take legal action.

So, using Honroe's criteria, how does the digital consumers' rights compare to physical consumers'? The only rights the digital consumer can clearly claim are a limited version of 1 and a very restricted version of 2, as well as 9-11. She has lost 3 and 5, and probably 6, 7, and 8 as well. Clearly, the "owner" of digital God Hand's rights fall far short of what liberal societies have traditionally meant by the term ownership.

Microsoft's original plan for the Xbox One would have brought the limitations most often associated with digitally distributed games to the Xbox's physical media as well, with the added restriction that the proposed Xbox One would have had to connect to Microsoft's servers once every 24 hours in order to authorize game play. Miss a check, and games would be disabled on that console until a connection with Microsoft could be established. Thankfully, Microsoft listened to the outcry among its customers and curtailed this plan, but it does beg the question of exactly why we are so outraged when our ideals of ownership are threatened in physical media but we rarely complain when the same basic policies are implemented in a purely digital marketplace. Perhaps it is simply because we are more accepting of

variation in ownership rights in new types of products and services, and it is the loss of rights we have grown accustomed to in existing forms which angers us. Or maybe it is because we at least have the option to own as long as the full ownership of a retail product is still available; it becomes our decision whether the convenience of digital outweighs the comprehensive rights of physical. Digitally distributed products also tend to be cheaper, so maybe most of us are simply willing to cede ownership for the right price.

Whatever the case may be, Microsoft appears to have overreached in attempting to end the bifurcated model of game ownership which currently exists on Xbox. That doesn't mean that the rights we have grown accustomed to in retail game purchases are secure. Far from it. Microsoft's and other companies' plans have simply been delayed. The consumer is seemingly already content with his limited array of rights in the digital marketplace. Many PC game players have already gone fully digital. Microsoft simply has to wait out the seemingly inevitable collapse of the retail market. As soon as the demand for retail wanes just enough, Microsoft(and others) will make the leap to digital only. How many consumers will cry foul when this happens? Is today's game consumer the proverbial frog in a pot? Perhaps only sufficient education and awareness can succeed in proving otherwise.

Does digital have to come part and parcel with reduced rights for the consumer? It is so in the majority of cases, but there is one notable exception, *gog.com* aka Good Old Games. Surely every antiquated game player's best friend, GoG offers downloadable games DRM-free. Always a treasure trove of MS-DOS and Windows 95 classics, GoG is now expanding to include new indie releases and the latest games from GoG's owners CD Projekt.

Antiquated Game Player Review Philosophy

In *Antiquated Game Player* magazine's first issue I have included game criticism in the form of game reviews, but before we get to the reviews it is important to establish the publication's philosophical point of view with regard to reviewing and rating games. I will be using an evolution of a system that I first developed on an old blog of mine, Taipei Gamer. What follows is a refinement of the ideas first developed there.

The first point is to take review scores seriously. If a grade is assigned, it naturally creates an aura of objectivity and carries the weight of perceived authority. To some readers, the grade assigned will carry more weight than the content of the review itself. If the critic desires the air of authority that concrete scores encourage, he must take as much responsibility for the score assigned as he does for the content of his review.

Therefore, the critic should think carefully about the scoring system that he adopts. It is vital that the system used is consistent with the critic's philosophy of judging the medium in question. Personally, although I recognize that taste is subjective, I believe that I can at least attempt to objectively evaluate my subjective experience. The challenge lies in devising a scoring system which is informative enough to allow readers with their own varying predilections to make their own interpretations of quality without sacrificing the objectivity and finality of assigning a 'final' score. It is difficult to do this with a single, one dimensional metric.

Games are unique among art forms in that they are interactive, but they also contain narrative and aesthetic elements like movies, novels, comics, etc. Unlike a purely aesthetic product, games have both form and function, and a critic has to consider both. It is for this reason that I am adopting a dual metric for *Antiquated Game Player*. I will evaluate each game with regard to the quality of its Play and the quality of its Experience. It is important to separate the two because each individual weights these fundamental qualities differently.

The Play score is a measure of what distinguishes games from noninteractive mediums. The Play score is a metric for gameplay and game design. Mechanics, systems, level design, and the way all these elements come together to make a fun

game are the key components rated by the Play score.

If the Play score is a measure of a game's design, then the Experience score is a measure of its artistic achievement. The Experience consists of a game's music, writing, visual style, sound design, overall setting, etc. All of these factors influence the player's involvement in the game and are therefore important even if they don't have much of a direct impact on the player's actual interaction with the game.

There may be some overlap between the components measured by Play and Experience. For instance, the sound design in a first person shooter may provide an increased level of information and awareness to the perceptive player. Such a feature could be considered relevant to both the Play score and the Experience score. Likewise, in an exploration intensive RPG interesting environments may be necessary to realize the goals of the game's design, making those environments important from a design perspective as well as an artistic one. Despite any overlap between what is being measured by the two metrics, each metric is still able to stand on its own.

A Problem of Scale

Now that I have defined what the metrics I am using measure, I need to

define how I will measure them. In other words, my metrics need a scale. Probably the most common set of complaints I see regarding quantitative scores relate to the scale being used, which is almost always linear. Sometimes there is confusion in interpretation because the scale used is numerically linear but semantically nonlinear. For instance, the difference between a 6 and a 7 is greater or less than the difference between a 9 and a 10. Another common source of misinterpretation regards what constitutes an average score. Percentile scales and 10 point scales are particularly susceptible to this type of misinterpretation. Many readers will interpret a 7 or 70% as an average score even though it is well above the median score of 5 or 50%. To avoid confusion, the scale used should be numerically and semantically consonant. The numerical mean should match the semantic mean and the relative numerical differences should be consistent with their semantic interpretation.

Another common complaint related to numerical scales is that the differences between scores often seem arbitrary. Percentile scales, for instance, are much more precise than any reviewer can justify. Having too much precision in a scale will undermine it to the point that readers will begin to question the accuracy as well. Linear scales compound the precision problem because the greatest works

are often much, much more impressive than the average, but extending a linear scale far enough to adequately represent that may make the scale appear to be overly precise.

So, I want to avoid linear scales and use a nonlinear one that game players have an intuitive grasp of. It is also best if the scale is not easily confused with a linear one. My solution is to use a scale based on 3d6. Yep, the very same scale used to measure ability scores in Dungeons and Dragons(for those not familiar with D&D, players generate their characters' ability scores by rolling three 6-side dice and summing the results). The biggest numerical advantage to using 3d6 is that it is distributed normally, i.e. the graph of possible values is a bell curve. The major non numerical advantage is that it is familiar, and even if you don't know what a normal distribution is, you probably realize that rolling an 18 is quite a bit harder than rolling a 17.

The scores themselves will be represented visually by images of three dice. This serves to add another layer of information based on the specific dice chosen to represent the score. A 13 could be represented by 5-4-4 or 6-6-1, for example. A score of 6-6-1 would indicate potential greatness brought down by one or more serious flaws.
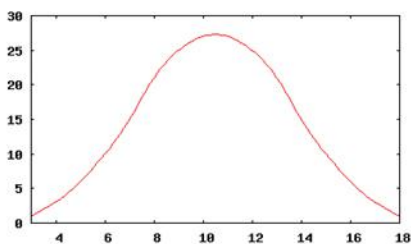
The probability distribution of 3d6.

To provide a little more detail, the median score is 10.5. Since I'm only using whole numbers, this means the average score ranges from 9 to 12. Scores within this range account for roughly 48% of the population. Less than half of one percent of the population would have an 18. Of course I am not going to assign scores with the sole aim of fitting a probability distribution, but the distribution does help define the relative difference between scores.

Guidelines

Now that I have defined the scale, I'd like to put forth a few guidelines I will follow when assigning scores.

All games are scored relative to what they are trying to achieve, with the very highest scores reserved for true innovation. The traits that make a good RPG are simply quite different from those of an action game, and so a game's concept must of course be kept in mind when considering the quality of a game's design. Similarly, when judging a game's experience it would be silly to expect the same level of

exposition from a shmup(2D scrolling shoot'em up a la Ikaruga, Galaga, etc.) as from an RPG. The experience of a shmup is less about narrative and more about evoking a certain feeling through music and visual presentation. Genres which are more narratively focused will in some ways be judged to a higher standard. The fact that many story-focused RPGs require 40+ hours to finish places a huge burden on developers to create a consistently strong narrative and interesting setting. A five stage shmup should not be punished for having less content(unless more content would make for a better shmup.)

Context is also important when rating a game. The very highest scores are reserved for those games which are both incredibly well executed and groundbreaking in some way, and innovation is meaningless outside of the context of when the game was released. The original DOOM would score higher than the many clones which followed, even though some may have been just as well executed. Technological context is also important. Were a new 16 bit console game released today, its technology-related aspects would not be compared against current gen consoles.

For determining the Experience score, a useful guideline is to consider how interesting the game would be if you were watching someone else play it. This doesn't perfectly capture my concept of Experience, but it is still useful to consider because many elements measured by the Experience score can be appreciated by someone other than the player, such as music, art design, story, etc. There are some crucial differences though. Player immersion is certainly part of the Experience, but immersion is hard to measure if you aren't the one playing. The visual feedback provided by video games in response to user input can make the user feel like a hero in ways that movies and other passive media cannot. This type of immersion isn't captured by the Play score because the visual feedback often has little or no impact on actually playing the game. It is a complex topic, but hopefully these examples clarify the concept of Experience.

And with that, I believe I have written more about *Antiquated Game Player's* review philosophy and metrics than any mainstream gaming web site or print magazine. Kind of a shame considering the thousands of reviews that the industry has collectively written.

Antiquated Opinion

Dark Sun: Shattered Lands

Before Icewind Dale, before Baldur's Gate and all its many offshoots, there was one company that was synonymous with Dungeons and Dragons computer games. That company was SSI. Strategic Simulations Incorporated would achieve legendary status amongst computer gamers in the late 80s for its series of Advanced Dungeons and Dragons CRPGs, known collectively as the Gold Box games. Combining first person dungeon crawling with overhead view tactical battles, the Gold Box games were the first to capture the tactical nature of D&D combat. Not a surprising accomplishment for a company originaly founded to publish and produce computer simulations of miniature wargames.

By the early 90s, though, the Gold Box engine was showing its teeth. SSI needed a new engine and a new game series to carry the AD&D banner. Released in 1993, Dark Sun: Shattered Lands was the first game developed with this new engine. The game that would hopefully carry SSI to even greater heights. Alas, that was not to be. Only one other game was made with the new engine(well, two if you count the online game), Shattered Lands's sequel Wake of the Ravager. I don't know why Shattered Lands didn't lay a foundation for continued market success, but it wasn't because it was a bad game. I think that the growing popularity of first person 3D games may have prompted SSI to move away from 2D, tactical style games like Shattered Lands. SSI's final AD&D games would all follow in that mold. Whatever the case may be, Shattered Lands was in many ways ahead of its time. Another turn-based tactical CRPG, Fallout, would come out just a few years later and become an instant classic. And later, of course, Bioware's Infinity Engine would meld tactical D&D battles with RTS innovations and would lead the CRPG rebirth. But enough history, I'm here to tell you why Shattered Lands is still worth your time a decade after its release.

A rare instance where a thief is actually useful in a D&D computer game!

For those who don't know, Dark Sun is an AD&D campaign setting which debuted during the 2nd Edition era. It is, essentially, a post apocalyptic fantasy setting. The desert world of Athas is a harsh one. Rapacious exploitation of magic and resources has left a world almost devoid of oceans, lakes, and rivers. Even the mineral resources have been depleted. The bulk of humanity is clustered in tyrannical city states ruled by sorcerer kings. Slavery is common place, and the only real freedom exists in small villages eking out an existence in the wastelands. Most of the common D&D tropes have been twisted to create a unique setting and the harsh darwinian evolution of Athas has created a rational justification for 2E's trend of power inflation and munchkinism. Characters routinely have ability scores above 18, every character has innate psionic powers, half giants and the mantis-like thri-kreen are playable races, and so on.

Somehow it comes together better than your adolescent D&D campaigns probably did, and is actually perfect for a computer game due to the number of options available to the player.

When you first step into the world of Athas, it will be either with the pregenerated party, or with up to four characters of your own creation. As is customary in these games, you have to roll virtual dice to generate a character's stats but can reroll as many times as you like. You can also manually adjust stats up or down if the random number generator isn't to your liking. I avoided the temptation to do that myself, and can tell you that you don't need to max everything out to have a decent chance of finishing the game. Cheating probably wouldn't hurt your enjoyment too much though, because there are some difficult battles in your future, especially the climactic battle, but more on that later. Once

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your party is established, you will enter the world of Dark Sun as slaves condemned to fight in the arena of the City State of Draj. The arena is a great introductory area, because it is self contained and encourages you to engage in the kind of exploration and problem solving that is crucial throughout the game. The arena also teaches you that combat in Dark Sun can be brutal and harsh. Your party can be easily squashed in these early encounters if you aren't careful. And finally, there are multiple means of escape from gladitorial slavery in the arena, making it an effective training ground for the difficulty and open-ended nature of the rest of the adventure.

The game is presented from an overhead view with a perspective similar to that of the tactical combat view from the Gold Box games. Combat, exploration, and NPC interaction are all presented from this viewpoint. Despite the universal "tactical" view of the game field, the game is much more focused on exploration and character interaction

than its predecessors were. The field is apparently a combination of unique hand drawn features and reused or repeated tiles. Rooms are littered with furniture, chests, and other objects which may be searched or otherwise interacted with. You will quickly realize that there is a lot to be gained through careful exploration. NPCs and monsters can also be examined and if combat has not been initiated, conversed with. The conversation interface is very similar to what would be implemented later in Fallout and Baldur's Gate, only without the skill checks that Fallout would become famous for. There are multiple lines of questioning that may be pursued and multiple responses and attitudes available when responding to an NPC's questions. How you choose to respond can have ramifications in the game. Unlike Baldur's Gate, there is no fog of war so you can pan around each area and view its geography and denizens. Objects must be within a player character's line of sight to be interacted with, however. While not

Combat in Dark Sun is turn-based and tactical.

Unusual races make the desert their home.
This is my Thri-Kreen Druid/Psionicist.

realistic, the transparency of each area speeds up exploration—especially outdoors—and allows for quick movement between points of interest via the mini-map.

When it comes to combat, the game's greatest strength lies in the AD&D ruleset. AD&D's mechanics are quite a bit different from most systems designed with video games in mind, especially modern video games. Modern game designers seem to prefer building systems with mathematical uniformity and numerical balance. Systems that translate into smooth curves when graphed. Whereas AD&D still bears the mark of a tradition, wargaming, that sought to model reality. Of course, AD&D isn't striving to model reality so much as it is a rich tapestry of fantasy fiction, but

verisimilitude is still important. Balance is less important than the logic of the reality that is being modeled, and no significant effort was made to numerically balance the various character archetypes. For instance, mages are weak at low levels but by far the most powerful class once highly experienced. Within the constraints of a computer game this might be a problem, were it not for the fact that the player controls an entire party of characters. Monsters, likewise, don't scale evenly. There is no one attribute which sums up a monster's strength. Hit Dice is the closest because it determines both their hit points and their skill in combat, but there are still many other variables. Some monsters with high Hit Dice are easy to hit and some with low Hit Dice are hard to hit. Some

weak creatures, like a poisonous snake, can nevertheless kill with a single strike. A spell caster can die easily in one instance or wreak havoc if given a chance to unleash his magic. In general, the range of possible outcomes in any tactical situation is much greater in AD&D than in systems specifically designed for video games. Some decry this as randomness that interferes with player skill, but they miss something crucial.

Randomness is just another element the player has to manage to find success. His tactics must either be robust to randomness or he must be adaptable enough to adjust when a wrench is thrown in his plans. The more branches in the tree of possible outcomes, the more tactically demanding the scenario. So long as the player has the tools to deal with it, randomness doesn't obstruct player skill, it rewards it.

Shattered Lands certainly gives the player a hefty tool box: psionics, mage spells, druid spells, cleric spells, loads of magical accoutrements, the full AD&D 2nd Edition complement. Perhaps the latter Infinity Engine games would eventually surpass it, but Shattered Lands definitely had the most complete implementation of AD&D up to that point. And to this day, Shattered Lands and its sequel remain the only D&D computer games to have psionics. Of course it isn't just the volume of elements included that makes the game special. Shatterd Lands's implementation is also as faithful to the rules as you could reasonably expect a computer game to be. Cloud and wall spells even block the line of sight required

> "... the range of possible outcomes in any tactical situation is much greater in AD&D than in systems specifically designed for video games."

by archers and spell casters. This last detail is important, because to survive the climactic confrontation will require exploiting every advantage the system can give you. You will have to face off against multiple waves of enemies, each of which outnumbers your party and include a number of dangerous spell casters. I tried and failed at least a half dozen times without even coming close to victory. With each attempt taking 20 minutes or more, I had almost given up, thinking that perhaps I needed to go back to an earlier save and complete some more side quests. After thinking for a bit, and being reminded of how awesome the Entagle spell is in this game, I hit upon a new strategy. With a combination of Entagle to trap enemy fighters, various wall and fog

spells to limit line of sight, and free action spells that allowed my two best fighters to move unhindered through the Entagle spell, I was able to win the battle almost unscathed. And that, my friends, is a perfect example of why Shattered Lands's implementation of the AD&D system works so well. Not even the capricious hand of fate is enough to thwart sound tactics. The Dark Sun series may have been a victim of fate, and a failure in the

marketplace, but victory may still be had against overwhelming odds in the harsh, computer generated world of Shatterd Lands.

PLAY

⚃ ⚅ ⚅

EXPERIENCE

⚄ ⚄ ⚁

Curse of the Azure Bonds

The second of SSI's legendary Gold Box AD&D computer games, Curse of the Azure Bonds is a recognized classic but a hard game to review fairly today. However, it does have a number of technical and interface improvements over its predecessor Pool of Radiance which make it a friendlier game to play. In fact, I had originally planned to review Pool of Radiance, but simply could not tolerate the agony of manually memorizing and casting healing spells over and over to heal my party when resting, a tedium that has thankfully been circumvented by CotAB's handy FIX command. The lack of mouse support, use of Home and End keys to navigate up and down lists, and other such oddities will still serve as barriers to some players' enjoyment, but most antiquated game players will adjust relatively quickly.

Once the player has sunk his teeth into the game, what he will find is a late 80s AD&D power fantasy, a sort of AD&D dialed to eleven. The player's ability to save any time outside of battle or an event scene, and to keep numerous save states at once naturally throws off the balance of a typical AD&D campaign. To compensate, the game's demented DM throws encounters of horrid lethality at the player almost right out of the gate. CotAB is certainly not an easy game, especially in the game's first half, but conquering these challenges must have been an incredible thrill to those early adopters of electronic Dungeons and Dragons. The sheer epicness of the game is unfortunately also a drawback. The power curve is just too

steep. Any dungeon master worth her salt knows not to introduce so much loot so quickly. Halfway through the game, the player will view most treasure distribution screens as an irritation. +2 longswords and thousands of platinum pieces will be left like bread crumbs marking the party's trail of destruction. In the early stages though, that first cache of almighty magic will catalyze an addiction capable of compelling the player through those difficult early encounters. The problem occurs when the rush subsides and the tedium of endless battle encroaches. CotAB is a game I expect more than a few stop playing about half way through. That first half though, that was pretty fun.

PLAY

EXPERIENCE

Pinball Arcade

I guess it doesn't get any more antiquated than pinball. Somehow though, the best pinball tables are still timeless. And that is exactly what Pinball Arcade aims to bring, the very best pinball tables that ever existed, faithfully recreated in gorgeous 3D with indistinguishable from real life physics. The initial purchase comes with four classic tables, with more available to purchase separately. The bulk of my time has been spent with The Twilight Zone and Star Trek The Next Generation tables. Each table has a set of goals to aim for and comes with a detailed description of the table's features and secrets. It is certianly worth reading an overview of the table to get your bearings, but I'd delay reading in detail until you've put

some time in. Figuring things out on your own is part of the fun of pinball, but with tables as complex as these, you'll never understand everything without some help.

PLAY

EXPERIENCE

NAME   AC   HP
ALEENA   -5   72
MORATHIN   -1   72
ONYX   0   52
MELF   0   49
HARMONIA   3   58
IOCONO   0   32

S 14:56

THE WIZARD INTONES, 'THIS IS A SPHERE
OF ANNIHILATION. ITS TOUCH MEANS
UTTER DESTRUCTION. ONLY A MAGE CAN
CONTROL ITS FLIGHT. YOU MAY SURRENDER
AT ANY TIME.'

PRESS (ENTER)/(RETURN) TO CONTINUE

Curse of the Azure Bonds features first person exploration with occasional scripted encounters, like this wizard in Dracondras's Tower.

The Mulmaster Beholder Corps. The most over the top encounter in an over the top game and probably the most ridiculous fight in computer role-playing history. This screenshot doesn't even show most of the drow lords and rakshasa.

RAKSHASA

HITPOINTS 35

AC -4

RAKSHASA
CASTS A SPELL

Pen & Paper

If you read about or discuss pen and paper role playing online, particularly if you are interested in Dungeons and Dragons, then you have probably heard of the Old School Renaissance or OSR. Striving to re-popularize the game systems of their youth, the members of the OSR have produced a staggering amount of content over the last few years for older, out-of-print role playing games, including a number of clones of the game systems themselves. Primarily focused on older editions of D&D, the so-called retro clones have cleverly used the Open Game License created by Wizards of the Coast for D&D 3rd Edition to create legal clones which are mechanically almost indistinguishable from the originals. Since algorithms aren't protected by copyright and any term used in the OGL's System Reference Document is fair game for the retro clones, near perfect facsimiles of all editions of D&D are now in print and supported by a wealth of new amateur and professional products.

The first retro clone, the one which made the leap from using the OGL to make another D20 System game to actually recreating an older system's rules was OSRIC. OSRIC is an almost perfect copy of the original Gary Gygax authored rules of Advanced Dungeons and Dragons. But more importantly, OSRIC captures not only the rules, but also the culture of Gygaxian AD&D. The original rulebooks were written for an audience of dedicated hobbyists with previous experience in what had come before(thus the designation of "Advanced" in the game's title.) Many underlying aspects of the game that were implicitly understood by players in 1980 are no longer universal to D&D 30 years later. The evolution of role playing games and even fantasy literature has progressed so much in the intervening decades that a newcomer to AD&D today would have a completely different frame of reference than the reader Gygax was originally writing for. The OSRIC text presents that frame of reference masterfully. The detailed framework around the rules for dungeon exploration and time management, the emphasis on the importance of henchman and hirelings, and the descriptions of the player character archetypes do an especially good job of establishing this frame of reference. Modern D&D differs substantially in these areas.

The OSRIC book condenses the three core rulebooks of AD&D, the Players

Handbook, the Dungeon Masters Guide, and the Monster Manual into one nearly 400 page volume. It doesn't include every rule from those three, as it dispenses with most of the optional rules that were rarely used in play, such as Psionics and the Weapon vs. Armor table. I consider this a boon, as it reinforces OSRIC's presentation of AD&D as it was actually played back in the day. OSRIC is nice because it captures the essence of AD&D before the power inflation of Unearthed Arcana. Considering that OSRIC is also better organized than the original rulebooks, OSRIC has become my preferred version of AD&D. I would still recommend that Dungeon Masters have a copy of the original Dungeon Masters Guide. OSRIC doesn't attempt to recreate everything therein, and that book is worth it for Gygax's unique flair alone. But even without the Dungeon Masters Guide, OSRIC is THE retro clone for those desiring an authentic Gygaxian role playing game.

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