

Teaching an Old Dog New Tricks

How this Old School DM moved to 5th Edition, by Newt Newport

The Journey Begins

I started playing in the mid-80s, with using the D&D Basic (Red Box) and Expert (blue box) sets, which were commonly available from UK toy shops at the time. After about two years I graduated to AD&D 1st ed which I bought from a friend's brother. In the early 90s, I bought 2nd Ed but it never really gelled because it felt like too much of a rewrite which made the game bland in tone and execution, and I wasn't keen on the endless player options books. I bought 3.5 multiple times, wanted to like it but too much like the Collectable Card Game of RPGs because of the way Feats worked for players. As I was raised on the much simpler B/X, it was all too much. So, I embraced the OSR in the early part of the last decade, because it's what I know and even where it progresses it's in a logical way that D&D would have gone if they had only done cleaned up versions.

I found 5th ed initially confusing. My initial assessment was that it was very much a museum piece to satisfy all fans of all editions.

But would it please me?

Eventually, after dodging the issue for a good year after I bought the three core rulebooks, I knuckled under and sorted out running a game. At this point, some of you will go "well why didn't you find a good game and learn by playing?". Well this old dog doesn't do that as a rule. If I can't get my head around a game and successfully bring it to the table, then the game is doing something wrong. With 30+ years of running experience, I've encountered too many half-baked or needlessly overly complicated RPGs (which to be honest, I felt 3.5 was), not to stick to this rule.

What you'll need

An open mind. There's no point in even trying to engage with a ruleset if you not prepared to give it a go as written. Which is why I held off running 5th ed for a good year. "Why bother learning 5th ed when various OSR rulesets are letting me scratch that itch?" is what went around my head again and again as a blocker.

A 5th ed ruleset. I got the three big core-rule books (as you do), and marvellous well written and gorgeously illustrated books. But what's taught me the game are

the much more stripped-down versions, such as the ones in the Starter Set and the online SRD resource, which I have to use to produce 5th Ed modules like this. The Starter Set was especially useful for its pre-made characters especially. Those character sheets initially look intimidating - but they have all the special abilities and spell description so no need to keep on checking back to the player's book.

I'm not just being cheap here, the fact that there's less padding, only the rules, helps me out. I learned Old School D&D via the much lighter and concise, Basic D&D Red Box, and the AD&D 1st Edition books were more reference books.

What Came Out When I Took It For a Run?

Character Options

Characters were very familiar with a whole set of new options. For example, at set up, there were the familiar Race/Class/Alignment options along with the new idea of character background. Backgrounds are great and not as intimidating as I first thought. Their main point mechanically is to encourage divergence between characters - so no more identical fighters - and give bonus skills. Plus, they do provide a quick but flavoursome account of what the character was up to before they became an adventurer, with lots of hooks for in-game events.

It's relatively easy enough to restrict player choices to familiar classes and races, but if you decide to push the boat out, they all use the same framework.

Rules

A couple of things to zoom in that underpin 5th Ed.

Saves based on ability checks, so you have a Dex based save to avoid that falling masonry. Usually, the target number is 10, and you roll a d20 and add your Dex modifier with success being equal or higher.

There's a system of *Skills and Skill checks*, which is concise and well-defined if you need them. Most of the time I stuck with a "describe in detail what your character is doing" method of skill resolution that to be fair I use in

most games I run, and this is ok with 5th ed that doesn't insist you use the skill system every time. Like a lot of things, it's a tool that is there if you need it.

Passive skill checks are a quick shorthand way of resolving all those secret rolls. So next time your adventures go past that secret door, you check their passive skill rating for Perception skill, which is a static number, and see if anyone has over the target number.

Although there are modifiers in 5th ed, the real workhorse for giving the players' bonuses or penalties is the *Advantage/Disadvantage* dice system. If you are fed up with fiddly mods, you'll love this rule! Players like it because it's a very transparent system that allows them the physical joy of rolling another dice.

Inspiration? I've not really used this rule, finding them too much like Hero Points (which I am jaded upon from narrative games). But as a player centred mechanic, I'm sure we could have easily picked up on it if the players had brought it up. And like all of 5th Ed it's a well written easy to pick up ruling, that can be referenced and absorbed quickly.

Combat uses the *Ascending AC* system. Here AC starts at a base of 10 for an unarmoured average character with no DEX bonus, goes upwards as you add DEX bonus and armour. If you've not made the transition from Old School Descending systems, where base AC is 9, and you have lots of tables by class to find out the target number to hit, you are going to have to put in the small amount of effort to make ascending AC a natural habit.

Give the players time to get used to their *character's special abilities* and the way that they interact with the other characters. Rather than endless lists of Feats, 5th Edition uses character class-based special abilities, some of which are defaults for the class and some are chosen by the player, which again helps avoid members of the same class being mechanically the same. 5th Ed gives the players lots of options in play, but not overwhelmingly obscure ones like 3.5 ed's feats system.

Three things to realise, and rejoice in, that avoids character redundancy at low levels:

- Mages get cantrips/ and an inbuilt magic missile type attack, as well as an array of one-shot spells, which have been thoroughly revised sorting out some of the classic problems suffered in earlier editions.
- Clerics get a reusable automatic healing ability, which means they don't have to waste a spell slot on Cure Light Wounds.
- Fighters get a Second Wind ability that allows them to heal hit points equal to 1d10 + level instantly.

As a result, even at 1st level, characters are heroic and capable of having more options built-in on what they can do. So be prepared for the game to be more centred on the players. OSR games can quite often revolve around the expectation that the Referee provides detail about the world for the players to interact with and entertain

them, with a lot of character redundancy at lower levels (MUs when they've spent their spells) and careful resource management. 5th Ed does away with this to a large degree with character abilities that overcome character redundancy at lower levels.

Making Adventures

From the get-go, I intended to write my own adventures. For me, this is a big part of the fun of any rules system. Players get to focus on their characters; I build worlds. The Sorcerer Under the Mountain is a result of this and 5th Ed doesn't take the joy of world-building away from the Referee. I chose to go with what I knew and adapt it to any rule changes. Also, adventure creation isn't covered in the OGL SRD or starter sets I was using to learn the game, although you could argue that the starter set shows you by the example adventure.

You can quite easily do an old school dungeon, and it can quite easily revolve around sandbox play, but you must give players space to explore their characters and let them be the star of the game. You could argue this was the case back in the old days, but it is even more so under 5th. If you try to shoehorn them into a resolution of an encounter, even 1st level characters have enough abilities and resilience for them to work their way out.

Monsters

Monsters have special abilities and skills too, highlighted in the description. They are not quite as detailed as the characters but give you a firm template to mod if you want to work up Aldriss the Orc Scout from the Orc Warrior stat block. Read the monster creation rules carefully. On the one hand, there's a loose way of just picking an appropriate level and then there's more procedural approach. In the referee's book, both run through the same section! Which does work trust me. Overall, I found 5th Ed a helpful compact shorthand for monsters and their abilities which puts everything you need to know in one place.

Magic Items

One area that on the brief interaction I had with it, since Sorcerer is a low-level dungeon, which worked pretty much as it did in the old days. I'd imagine the DM's Guide has detailed notes about how much magic you should give out as treasure, balanced for the fact that 5th Ed characters have more special abilities, but there were no new fiddly rules about the use of magic items that I had to learn.

Enjoyed this Article, Why Not Pick Up the Adventure?

This article was originally published as an Appendix in *The Sorcerer Under the Mountain*, an adventure for 5th Edition published by D101 Games. The scenario is a one level dungeon intended to be familiar enough for old school DMs so they can concentrate on learning 5th Edition rules.

- <https://d101games.com/product/the-sorcerer-under-the-mountain/>