What is 4aD?

Four Against Darkness (4AD) is an old-school dungeon exploration adventure game designed for solo or cooperative play with minimal space and equipment. All you need is a pencil, two six-sided dice (a full polyhedral set at higher levels), and graph paper—though a dry-erase board or dungeon tiles work just as well.

This is a **player-facing** game: only the heroes roll dice, and all actions are described from their perspective. When you attack, you roll to hit your Foe; when the Foe attacks you, you roll to defend against the Foe's attack.

You control a party of four adventurers delving into dungeons generated by dice rolls. The game is typically played solo, but it also supports co-operative play, shared characters, and traditional GM-led sessions. Players may take turns as GM, create narrative elements on the fly, or use random Tables and oracle systems to guide the adventure. Miniatures or paper figures may be used to track the characters' position. This is optional and has no advantage other than giving a visual representation of the heroes.

There's a Ton of Supplements!

The original *Four Against Darkness* was a booklet written in a weekend. Since then, the game has grown far beyond its simplistic dungeon-crawling roots, with a wide range of modular supplements that can be used or ignored as you see fit, without altering the rules.

Depending on how much complexity you want, you'll find a bit of everything: card-based adventures, random dungeons, poster dungeons, gamebook-style quests, fiction with playable appendices, oracle decks, ready-to-play maps, monster books, a serialized encyclopedia of monsters, and more. Some materials are family-friendly; others explore mature themes, from horror to humor, and are recommended for an adult audience.

With so much available, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Our advice: start small with just this core book, and add the supplements you like one at a time. You don't need to buy everything... **The only essential ingredients are pencils, paper, dice, and your imagination.**

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Why Four?

4AD is class-based. Each hero represents an archetype—such as rogue, cleric, warrior, wizard, barbarian, or ranger—with unique abilities. A party of four provides a good balance of skills and roles, while still being manageable for a single player. This leaves room for an occasional NPC, like a hireling, joining the party.

Length of the Game

Your first mission may take a little over an hour as you learn the rules. Once you're familiar with the mechanics, a typical session takes about 45 minutes.

Foes Never Roll Dice

All dice rolls are made by the heroes. To determine if a spell, attack, or skill affects a Foe, the PC will roll against the Foe's Level, a number representing the Foe's power, abbreviated as L. When attacking, characters roll against the Foe's L to determine if they slay it. When a Foe attacks, the player decides which heroes are attacked and they make Defense rolls against the Foe's L—failing means the attacked character takes damage.

Dice Codes

The basic game (Levels 1–4) uses only six-sided dice, with the following notations:

d3: Roll a d6, 1–2 = 1, 3–4 = 2, 5–6 = 3.

d6: Roll a standard six-sided die (1–6).

d6+1, d6+2, etc.: Roll a d6 and add the number.

2d6: Roll two d6s and add them (2–12).

d66: Roll two d6s in sequence—first is the tens digit, second the units (e.g., 3 and 4 = 34). This will generate a number from 11 to 66.

At higher levels, 4AD uses additional polyhedral dice: d8, d10, d12, and d20. A d100 uses two 10-sided dice, first die is the tens, second the unit (e.g., if you roll a 7 and a 9= 79).

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Abbreviations and Definitions

4AD uses the following terms and abbreviations:

PC: Player Character, a character controlled by the player.

NPC: Non-Player Character, a character controlled by the game.

L (Level): A number showing the power of a Foe, character, trap, or danger. Used to set the difficulty of a Save, Attack roll or Defense roll. The higher the number, the more challenging it is.

Save: A roll made by a PC to avoid harm or negative effects (traps, magic abilities, poison, gases, dragon breath, gaze attack, environmental hazards).

+L: Add the PC's Level to the roll.

+1/2 L: Add half the PC's Level, rounded down, to the roll.

+2XL: Add twice the PC's Level.

Reroll: Rerolling means rolling a die again. The result of the reroll stands, even if worse than the original. You may not reroll a reroll.

gp: Gold pieces. Gold coins used as currency.

3+, 4+, etc.: Roll a 3 or better, 4 or better, etc.

Tile: A space on the map (a room or a corridor in a dungeon)

Life: Life points, the amount of damage a PC or Foe can take before dying.

Tier: General grouping of PC levels.

HCL: Highest Character Level.

L1, L2, L3, etc: Level One, Level Two, Level Three, etc.

The Play Sheet uses the following icons:

Attack	Defense	Life	Clues	Trait	Milestone	Magic

The HCL System

Dangers scale with the party's strength, as more powerful heroes face tougher challenges. 4AD uses a formula called HCL—Highest Character Level. The Level (L) of a Foe or hazard is calculated by adding a modifier to L of the highest-level character in the party.

Example: Orcs are HCL+2. If your highest-level PC is L3, the orcs are L5 (3+2).

Some Foes have a minimum or maximum level.

Example: A common goblin may never exceed L6, no matter how powerful the party is. There's just so much a poor goblin can do.

HCL is set when a Foe or danger is first encountered and does not change if the party leaves and returns later, even if character levels have changed.

Example: A party's highest-level hero is a L3 warrior. They encounter HCL+3 Foes, making the Foes L6. The party flees. Later, the warrior levels up to L4. If the party returns to the Foes' room, Foes are still L6.

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Tier Number

Some formulas use the Tier Number, which categorizes a party's overall power based on the level of PCs:

Tier 1: Basic (PCs have Levels between 1–4)
Tier 2: Expert (PCs have Levels between Levels 5–9)
Tier 3: Heroic (PCs have Levels between Levels 10–14)
Tier 4: Legendary (PCs have Levels between Levels 15–19)
Tier 5: Epic (PCs are Level 20 or higher)

Use the Tier Number (1 to 5) in rules that refer to "Tier" instead of Level.

Example: Your warrior finds a legendary magic sword which lets her add +Tier to Attack rolls. The sword will give a +1 bonus at Basic Tier, but as soon as the warrior becomes L5 (Expert Tier), the bonus becomes +2.

Tier Dice

PCs use a die type for their Attack, Defense, and Save rolls based on their Tier. In this book, PCs are all Basic Tier, so they all use d6. In higher Tier books such as *Four Against the Abyss* and *Four Against the Forsaken Depths*, a higher Tier die will be used.

Tier 1: Basic characters use d6
Tier 2: Expert characters use d8
Tier 3: Heroic characters use d10
Tier 4: Legendary characters use d12
Tier 5: Epic characters use d20

Example: Warriors add +L to their Attack rolls. A L3 warrior will roll d6+3 for an Attack roll. A L10 warrior will roll d10+10.

Explosion Rule

An Explosion is an extraordinary success on a die roll, commonly called a critical success. At the Basic Tier, whenever you roll a 6 for any character action (Attack, Defense, Save, spellcasting), immediately roll another d6 and add it to the total. This is cumulative: if you roll another 6, roll again and keep adding. If you get lucky, you can achieve any number, allowing you to slay multiple weaker Foes in a single turn or succeed in a Save vs. threats higher than 6. Note that an explosion is NOT AN AUTOMATIC SUCCESS.

The number needed for an Explosion changes with the die type. d8 explodes on 7+, d10 on 8+, d12 on 9+, d20 on 10+. Higher Tier PCs will roll critical successes more often.

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The Party

You control a party of four adventurers. Each belongs to one of the classes described in the next pages—such as warrior, cleric, rogue, wizard, barbarian, dwarf, halfling, elf, acrobat, gnome,etc. Each class has its own strengths and weaknesses, which become clear during play.

Wizards are weak in combat but excel at casting spells and solving puzzles. Elves and halflings are agile. Halflings are lucky and have the best Saves. Warriors and barbarians can withstand more damage—barbarians are the toughest but cannot wear the best armor or use magic items.

A well-balanced party typically includes a mix of classes.

Print the Party Sheet at the end of the book to track wounds, possessions, gold, and levels. Use a pencil because values change throughout the game. Each hero is defined by name, level, and class. For example: Bruggo, L2 rogue. Each hero also has: Attack Value (offensive ability), Defense Value (ability to avoid damage), Life (how much damage the PC can take before dying). The Party Sheet includes space for Traits, special abilities (e.g., a wizard's spells, an acrobat's tricks), treasure, and equipment.

Your PCs are beginners and start at Level 1 (L1) with some basic gear and a small amount of gold. Each class has a Table of 6 character Traits. You may choose 1 (halflings choose 2) or select it randomly. Using Traits is optional, but makes your characters more interesting.
Ignore Advanced skills for the moment: they come into play at higher Tiers and are described in supplements such as *Four Against the Abyss* and *Four Against the Forsaken Depths.*
For purposes of Saves, sometimes classes are grouped in umbrella terms, e.g., Fighters (those who add +L to Attack rolls, such as dwarves, warriors, and barbarians), Elves (elf, fire elf, wood elf, etc.), Large characters (trolls, ogres, minotaurs, half-giants), Unliving (undead, elemental, or artificial PCs), Foresters (ranger, druid, conservationist, wood elf, wilderness guide, vagabond), Spellcasters (any class that can cast spells), small (fay, lutin).
E.g., if a rule says "All foresters add +Tier to their Save", any PC belonging to one of the forester classes would add +Tier.

Eight classes (warrior, barbarian, elf, dwarf, cleric, rogue, wizard, halfling) are called the "core" ones. The game is built around these iconic roles. Saves are described with references to these classes. For example, a Save to avoid a Trap might say "Rogues add +L to the Save; other classes add +1/2L". For this reason, the other classes are described as "Saving as…". E.g., the swashbuckler Saves as a rogue. If a Save gives a bonus to rogues ("rogues Save at +L"), a swashbuckler enjoys the same bonus, unless the Save says otherwise.