

The Critical Hit

The Dungeon Master's Guide, Again

by James Wade

When the revised *Player's Handbook* finally hit the shelves, I was shocked. Having seen little progress on the AD&D® Game revision for a few years, I assumed that, like many military weapons systems, the revision would forever be postponed, a victim of its own complexity.

The new *Player's Handbook* struck me as just another collection of rules. The organization was better, character classes were given greater flexibility and internal consistency, spells were modified, and so forth, but there were no fundamental changes in the system. Since most of the information from the old *Dungeon Masters Guide* had been incorporated into the revised PHB, I was more interested in seeing what shape the revised DMG would take. Then one day last May the new DMG was released, and, to my amazement, the result is nearly a different game.

Out With The Old

The old DMG was a hefty volume filled with rules, tables, and descriptions for all manner of things.

Though haphazardly organized, the book was designed to give the DM a way to solve most important situations with a dice roll or two. This was not surprising, as the AD&D system had roots in a set of rules for fantasy miniatures combat. This made the old system rigid, and it made the DM a neutral arbiter of the rules rather than a creative, controlling force using the rules to shape a campaign.

The AD&D game was very sophisticated when it was released 10 years ago, but since that time a spate of role-playing games have appeared that do not rely on class distinctions (fighter, cleric, etc.), and instead encourage role-playing and player interaction. To achieve this, rules such as *Paranoia*, *Chill*, and the *TOP SECRET/S.I.*™ game developed rule systems simple and flexible enough to allow the gamemaster full control of the campaign.

In With The New

The revised DMG sets out immediately to quash inflexibility. The book emphasizes the DM's primary role in shaping a campaign. This is reinforced by the book's conversational tone, which makes the reader feel like a part of a discussion. Rules are not handed down from on high; they are explained along with alternatives that might prove useful to some DMs.

The revised DMG stresses that there is more to being a good DM than rules knowledge, and it gives extensive treatment to topics that pose special problems: how to handle players, develop a campaign style, enforce character alignment, create interesting NPCs, create balanced encounters, and determine proper rewards (money and magic) for players and their characters. While all these areas are dealt with quite nicely, they are mainly clarifications of and expansions upon existing rules and guidelines.

The biggest changes in the new book occur in the combat and experience systems. The new combat system eliminates numerous "to hit" tables, replacing them with something that nearly all players have been using for years, THAC0. There are other changes, but the new system basically is a streamlined version of the old. Although the designers did a fine job, I don't know how they dropped the ball on the "to hit" procedure. When using THAC0, the player should subtract his modified attack roll from the THAC0. The result is the lowest armor class hit by the blow. The opponent's Armor Class should not be revealed prior to the attack, as the DMG suggests. Also, for some reason weapon type vs. armor adjustments are made to the base THAC0 rather than the attack roll like other modifiers; it would be less confusing if all modifiers were applied to the attack roll.

The experience system has undergone a complete overhaul. The old system promoted greed and violence by awarding experience points only for monsters slain and treasure gained. The new system stresses the goals of *fun*, *character survival*, *player improvement*, and *story completion*. Characters gain experience for defeating opponents, but

slaying them is not mandatory. Experience for treasure is an optional rule, and I suggest it not be used.

Other points that caught my attention were: the removal of sale values for magic items (who would sell a magic item?), the disappearance of artifacts (except for three examples) and a system that lets players and DMs create their own character classes. (I used it to create a barbarian and got a result very much like the fighter sub-class from *Unearthed Arcana*.)

My favorite part of the book is the chapter on alignment. Alignment always has been a part of the game, but the justification for its inclusion was never clear. This chapter, however, delves into the nature of alignment and its uses in the campaign. Alignment now becomes such a personal, private part of a character that, as the text explains, "Asking another character 'So what's your alignment?' is as rude a question as . . . well, it's so rude that any example we think of, we can't print."

Visually, the new DMG is striking. The cover art is wonderful, as are the interior color illustrations. Apart from these flashes of color, the print consists entirely of blue, gray, black, and white three-column pages. At first I didn't like the format, but I've since changed my mind. I'm not so sure about the print—there's enough blue and gray on some pages for a Civil War reenactment. The otherwise fine Jean Martin black and white illustrations that have been randomly filled in with shades of blue and gray are particularly distracting.

What disappoints me the most about the revised DMG is the editing. I've used the original DMG for nearly a decade without discovering so much as a typesetting error, and I expected the new edition to be likewise error free. Most of the mistakes are minor; the omission of the *trident of submission* description being the only major flaw. But the number of errors I caught on my first read-through does not speak well for the proofreaders.

Considering the revision's long overdue arrival, and the important shift from a miniatures perspective to a role-playing emphasis, the revised DMG, even with a few flaws, is well worth the price. □