

D&D ALTERNATIVES COMPARED

PATHFINDER 2E, CRITICAL CORE, AND SHADOWDARK

DND DICE ROLLER

A practical comparison of D&D and three strong alternatives, with honest strengths, weaknesses, and which type of group each game fits best.

D&D ALTERNATIVES COMPARED: PATHFINDER 2E, CRITICAL CORE, AND SHADOWDARK

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS IS STILL THE DEFAULT ENTRY point for fantasy tabletop roleplaying, and that makes sense. It is widely available, easy to find players for, and familiar to a huge part of the hobby. But “most popular” is not the same thing as “best for every group.”

A lot of players start looking for alternatives when one of a few things happens. They want deeper tactical combat. They want faster and deadlier dungeon crawling. They want a gentler on-ramp for younger players or players who need a more structured and supportive introduction. Or they simply want a game whose strengths line up better with the way their table already likes to play.

The good news is that you do not need to abandon fantasy roleplaying to move beyond D&D. You just need to be clear about what problem you are trying to solve.

THE SHORT VERSION

If you want the quick answer, it looks like this:

If your group wants...	Best fit
More tactical depth and character build choices	Pathfinder 2e
A more intentional, supportive introduction for younger or neurodivergent players	Critical Core
Fast, dangerous, old-school dungeon adventure with modern clarity	Shadowdark
Broad familiarity and the easiest time finding players	D&D

None of these games is objectively “better” than the others. They are better at different things.

WHY PEOPLE START LOOKING BEYOND D&D

D&D does a lot well. It gives players a heroic fantasy experience, it has a huge player base, and there is an enormous amount of published support around it. But it also has some tradeoffs.

Some groups find that:

- combat can feel slower than they want
- character power grows so quickly that danger becomes harder to maintain

- the rules are not as tactically tight as they would like
- the game asks for a style of play that does not fit kids, beginners, or players with specific support needs
- they want more tension, more simplicity, or less build sprawl

That is usually the real reason people start looking at alternatives. They are not rejecting fantasy adventure. They are trying to find a system that fits their table more naturally.

PATHFINDER 2E

Pathfinder 2e is the best known answer for players who like fantasy adventure but want more mechanical precision and more meaningful tactical choices.

WHAT IT DOES WELL

Pathfinder 2e shines when your group wants:

- structured, tactical combat
- a clear rules engine
- lots of character customization
- meaningful turn-by-turn choices
- strong support for players who enjoy building characters deliberately

The game rewards system mastery more than D&D does. If your players enjoy planning out feats, class options, and party roles, Pathfinder 2e gives them a lot to work with. It also tends to feel tighter in play because the rules framework is more deliberate and the action economy gives players a lot to think about each round.

WHERE IT IS WEAKER

Pathfinder 2e is not the best choice for every group.

Its main weaknesses are:

- higher rules load
- more reading during character creation
- more moving parts to track
- less immediate accessibility for casual players

If your table already struggles to remember the difference between a saving throw, an attack roll, and a skill check, Pathfinder can feel like adding more weight instead of solving a problem.

BEST FOR

Pathfinder 2e is best for:

- tactically minded groups
- players who enjoy crunchy character options
- tables that want a game with more explicit mechanical support

CRITICAL CORE

Critical Core is a very different kind of alternative. It is not trying to out-crunch D&D or out-lethal old-school dungeon crawlers. Its strength is that it was built with a specific use case in mind: helping new players, especially autistic learners and families, engage with roleplaying in a structured, supportive way.

WHAT IT DOES WELL

Critical Core is strongest when the goal is not just “play fantasy adventure,” but “make fantasy roleplaying accessible, intentional, and easier to facilitate well.”

Its strengths include:

- a friendlier on-ramp for beginners
- a more guided and supportive structure
- a clear educational and therapeutic design intent
- strong value for families, educators, therapists, and support workers
- reduced barrier to entry compared with heavier fantasy RPGs

This makes it a very different recommendation from Pathfinder or Shadowdark. Those are hobbyist alternatives. Critical Core is closer to a purposeful teaching and facilitation tool that also happens to be a tabletop RPG.

WHERE IT IS WEAKER

Critical Core is not the right fit if your group wants:

- deep tactical combat
- a big optimization game
- a highly lethal old-school crawl
- a large mainstream player community

It is specialized. That is its strength, but also its limitation. If your table is a bunch of veteran players wanting brutal hexcrawls or elaborate build puzzles, this is probably not the game you want.

BEST FOR

Critical Core is best for:

- kids and families
- therapeutic or educational settings
- autistic players and other players who benefit from a more structured introduction
- groups that value social development and accessibility as much as traditional RPG challenge

SHADOWDARK

Shadowdark is one of the most interesting alternatives for players who like the feel of older fantasy adventure games but do not want to wrestle with archaic presentation or clunky procedures.

WHAT IT DOES WELL

Shadowdark’s appeal is that it blends old-school danger with a more modern, readable rules presentation.

Its strengths include:

- fast character creation
- high tension and real danger
- quick, clean rules
- dungeon crawling that feels urgent
- lower mechanical bloat than modern heroic fantasy games

If D&D sometimes feels padded or too forgiving, Shadowdark can feel refreshingly sharp. It puts risk back on the table. Light matters. Supplies matter. Survival matters. Characters can die. The game does not try to protect players from bad decisions in the same way that modern heroic fantasy often does.

WHERE IT IS WEAKER

Shadowdark is not ideal if your group wants:

- detailed character builds
- long menus of powers and feats
- a very safe, heroic tone
- a game that assumes characters are durable action heroes from the start

Some groups love danger and uncertainty. Others hate it. Shadowdark works best when the table wants tension, not comfort.

BEST FOR

Shadowdark is best for:

- old-school style dungeon crawling
- groups that want quick play and meaningful danger
- players who want less rules bulk but still want strong fantasy atmosphere

SO WHICH ONE SHOULD YOU CHOOSE?

Here is the practical answer.

STAY WITH D&D IF:

- you want the easiest time finding players
- your table already knows the rules
- you want broad support and familiarity
- you like heroic fantasy and do not feel especially limited by the system

CHOOSE PATHFINDER 2E IF:

- your group wants more tactical depth
- build choices are part of the fun
- tighter rules are a feature, not a burden

CHOOSE CRITICAL CORE IF:

- your priority is accessibility, support, and intentional facilitation
- you are introducing kids, families, or neurodivergent players to roleplaying
- the social and developmental side of play matters as much as the mechanics

CHOOSE SHADOWDARK IF:

- you want fast play
- you want dungeon exploration to feel dangerous again
- you prefer tension, scarcity, and uncertainty over heroic power fantasy

MY HONEST TAKE

A lot of “D&D alternatives” articles make the mistake of treating every game as though it is competing for the same exact table. That is not true.

Pathfinder 2e is competing for the table that wants more tactics and more character options.

Critical Core is competing for the table that wants a more supportive and intentional entry point.

Shadowdark is competing for the table that wants danger, speed, and old-school energy.

Those are different needs.

So the right question is not “What is the best D&D alternative?” The right question is “What kind of experience does my group actually want?”

If you answer that honestly, the choice gets a lot easier.

FINAL RECOMMENDATION

If I had to reduce it to one sentence each:

- **Pathfinder 2e** is the best next step for groups who want more depth.
- **Critical Core** is the best next step for groups who want more accessibility and support.
- **Shadowdark** is the best next step for groups who want more tension and faster play.

And if none of those goals describe your table, then the truth is simple: you may not need an alternative at all.

D&D is still a perfectly good answer. It is just not the only one.



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