

THE VIRTUES OF EVERY D&D EDITION

FROM OD&D TO 5.5

DND DICE ROLLER

A roll-by-roll appreciation of every edition of Dungeons & Dragons - from the brown box of 1974 to the shiny 2024 revision - and what each one still does better than the rest.

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HALF A CENTURY AGO, A STRANGE LITTLE WHITE-box game appeared on a kitchen table in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin and quietly changed the world. Since then, *Dungeons & Dragons* has gone through more makeovers than a polymorphed wizard. Each edition has its loyalists, its critics, and its die-hard “this was the best one” partisans.

Rather than crown a single champion, let’s take a tour of the family tree and call out what each edition genuinely does **better than the others** - because every one of them earned its place at the table.

ORIGINAL D&D (1974) - “THE WHITE BOX”

The brown booklets in a white box. The OG. Three thin pamphlets, a few illustrations, and a lot of imagination required.

Virtues:

- **Pure imagination.** The rules are sparse on purpose. You and your DM fill in the gaps, which is how the entire hobby was born.
- **Fast character creation.** Roll 3d6 down the line, pick a class, name your fighter, go.
- **The original sandbox.** Hexcrawls, dungeon levels, wandering monsters - the structure of “go explore the unknown” is at its purest here.
- **Historical weight.** Reading OD&D today feels like reading the Dead Sea Scrolls of nerd culture.

If you want to feel the raw, unfiltered DNA of the hobby, OD&D is where you go.

AD&D 1ST EDITION (1977-1989) - GYGAX’S MAGNUM OPUS

The hardcovers. The *Player’s Handbook*, the *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, the *Monster Manual*. This is the edition that put D&D on the map - and into the moral panic of the 80s.

Virtues:

- **Voice and flavor.** Gary Gygax wrote like a thesaurus on a quest. Every page drips with personality, weird tables, and digressions on naval combat or polearm taxonomy.
- **THAC0’s grandfather.** The combat math is chunky, but it produces *stories*. A natural 20 in 1e feels earned.
- **Tournament-grade adventures.** *Tomb of Horrors*, *Against the Giants*, *Ravenloft*, *Queen of the Spiders* - many of the all-time-great modules were written for this system.
- **High lethality, high stakes.** Your level 1 magic-user has 1d4 hit points and one *magic missile* per day. Survival is a verb.

If your idea of D&D is “the dungeon is trying to kill you and that’s the point,” 1e is your edition.

AD&D 2ND EDITION (1989-2000) - THE STORYTELLER’S EDITION

2e cleaned up 1e’s tangled rules, dropped some of the more controversial bits (assassins, half-orcs, demons-by-name), and leaned hard into setting and story.

Virtues:

- **Settings, settings, settings.** *Forgotten Realms*, *Dragonlance*, *Dark Sun*, *Planescape*, *Ravenloft*, *Spelljammer*, *Birthright* - 2e is a golden age of campaign worlds.
- **Specialty priests and kits.** Class customization without the bolt-on complexity of later editions.
- **Tone shift toward narrative.** The DMG actively encourages collaborative storytelling, in-character roleplay, and long-running campaigns.
- **The boxed set.** Beautifully produced campaign boxes with maps, booklets, and player handouts you could actually hand out.

If you love worldbuilding and lived-in fantasy settings, 2e set the standard everyone else still copies.

D&D 3RD EDITION / 3.5 (2000-2008) - THE D20 REVOLUTION

When Wizards of the Coast bought TSR and rebuilt the game on a unified d20 mechanic, everything changed. Roll high. Add modifier. Beat the target number. Done.

Virtues:

- **One core mechanic.** Attacks, saves, skills, ability checks - all the same math. After decades of weird subsystems, this was a revelation.
- **The Open Game License.** The OGL turned d20 into an entire industry. *Pathfinder*, *Mutants & Masterminds*, *True20*, and a thousand third-party splatbooks exist because of it.
- **Massive character customization.** Multiclassing, prestige classes, feats, skill points. Build the character you actually want.
- **Tactical depth.** Battlemats, attacks of opportunity, flanking, and 5-foot steps gave combat a chess-like flavor that some players still miss.

If you love crunchy character building and tactical combat, nothing else scratches that itch quite like 3.5.

D&D 4TH EDITION (2008- 2014) - THE TACTICAL SKIRMISH

The most controversial edition. Loved by some, loathed by others, and quietly more influential than people admit.

Virtues:

- **Balance.** For the first time, every class felt like it was actually pulling its weight at every level. No more “linear fighters, quadratic wizards.”
- **Powers for everyone.** Martial classes got cool, named, repeatable abilities instead of “I attack again.” Fighters finally felt heroic.
- **Encounter design as art.** Monster roles (brute, lurker, controller, soldier, artillery) and minions made building memorable fights genuinely fun for the DM.
- **Skill challenges.** A clean framework for non-combat dramatic scenes. Imperfect, but it tried something new.

- **Modern game design.** 4e is where D&D started talking like a real designed game, not a tradition.

If you want a tight, balanced tactical game with cinematic class abilities, 4e is unfairly maligned. Try it again.

D&D 5TH EDITION (2014- 2024) - THE CROWD PLEASER

5e is the version that took D&D mainstream - streaming shows, video games, board games, lunchboxes. There's a reason.

Virtues:

- **Approachable.** The cleanest learning curve in D&D history. New players can be in a fight within twenty minutes of opening the book.
- **Bounded accuracy.** Modifiers don't spiral out of control. A goblin can still threaten a high-level party - in numbers, at least.
- **Advantage / disadvantage.** Roll two d20s, take the higher (or lower). Replaces a stack of fiddly +2s and -2s with one elegant mechanic.
- **Strong identity per class.** Subclasses give every class a distinct flavor without 3.5-level bloat.
- **Inspiration and roleplay hooks.** Bonds, ideals, flaws - little prompts that nudge new players toward characterful play.

If your goal is “get five friends rolling dice on a Friday night,” 5e is the most frictionless way to do that ever printed.

D&D 5.5 / 2024 EDITION - THE POLISHED LENS

The 2024 revision (sometimes called “5.5e” or marketed as “the 2024 Player's Handbook”) is fully backward compatible with 5e, but sands down most of the rough edges a decade of play exposed.

Virtues:

- **Cleaner rules language.** Conditions, spells, and class features are rewritten for clarity. No more “does *Hex* work on a familiar?” arguments.
- **Better-balanced spells.** Old problem children like *Conjure Animals* and *True Strike* have been reworked into something usable but not table-warping.
- **Stronger martial options.** Weapon Mastery properties give fighters, barbarians, and rogues meaningful tactical choices every turn.
- **Origin and background revamp.** Backgrounds now drive ability scores and a starting feat, making your character’s history mechanically meaningful.
- **Quality-of-life everywhere.** Crits only multiply weapon dice, exhaustion is a clean -2 per level, surprise has been simplified - dozens of small papercuts, all sanded down.

If you love 5e but wish someone would do a “director’s cut” pass, 5.5 is exactly that.

SO WHICH EDITION IS BEST?

Trick question. The best edition is **the one your group is actually playing.**

- Want raw, dangerous, exploratory dungeon-crawling? Go 1e or OSR.
- Want deep settings and long campaigns? 2e is unmatched.
- Want maximum character-build freedom? 3.5 (or its descendant, Pathfinder).
- Want a balanced tactical skirmish? 4e was ahead of its time.
- Want easy onboarding and Friday-night fun? 5e.
- Want all of that with fresh paint? 5.5.

Half a century in, D&D’s greatest virtue isn’t any single edition - it’s that there’s now an edition for every kind of player at every kind of table.

Now grab some dice. Roll for initiative. The dungeon doesn’t run itself!



DND DICE ROLLER

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