

Scraps from the Attic

In this book, you will find additional game mechanics that go beyond those presented in the original 1974 edition and the Swords & Wizardry RPG. These mechanics are a distillation of various rulings I made over the course of several campaigns using these rules. I refined them and wrote them down so they were easier to remember. Some of these rules originated in the early 1980s when I was using the advanced edition for my campaigns. When I started using Swords & Wizardry, I adapted my rulings to use those rules. This chapter is a basic overview of how I designed these mechanics to remain consistent with Swords & Wizardry and the classic editions, along with the tools I used to come up with new rulings.

When to make a ruling?

When running a campaign, you will discover that not everything a player wants to attempt as their character will be covered by the system. As a result, you will have to make a ruling.

There are three basic rulings. The attempt is not allowed because it is impossible. The attempt is allowed because it is automatically successful. Or, the result is uncertain, in which case a roll or series of rolls is needed.

The key thing to remember is that you can't assume your players know what you know. It works out best if you are prepared to explain your reasoning and willing to listen to your players' opinions on what factors are important for what the player wants to do.

Be prepared to coach the players from time to time, particularly if your campaign has a lot of setting details that are important. Otherwise, the players may become uncomfortable as they don't understand how you are going to rule when they try something as their characters.

Character Competence

I assume that the characters are competent in tasks involving their class and adventuring. Given time and the right equipment, they will succeed at what they try. Rolls are made where there a consequence to failure: the waste of valuable material, needing to complete something in a short amount of time, or the stress of combat.



Experience

A character's Class Level is representative of the character's life experience. In general, all characters have a class and level. In some cases, hit dice and notes on special abilities may act as a shorthand when the full details of class and level are not needed.

Levels 1 to 2 are considered to be trained apprentices. Characters are nominally capable of doing the job of their class or profession, but still have more to learn before being considered a veteran or fully trained.

Level 3 is where characters are considered professionals within their class or profession. In a guild, this is the point where a character becomes a journeyman and is allowed to take employment with any master willing to hire them. Burglars will now be respected enough to run their own heists. Clerics become full priests of their religion, allowed to officiate at services and ceremonies. Fighters receive their first minor command. Finally, Magic-Users are considered fully trained and ready to make their own way in the world.

Level 6 is where characters are considered to have mastered their profession and ready to assume various leadership roles. In guilds, the character would be considered a master of their profession. Burglars gain control over the jobs and heists done in a neighborhood. A Cleric becomes eligible to be a bishop, responsible for the flock of a small region or city. Fighters start to independently command troops as a captain. Finally, Magic-Users start to take on apprentices to train and to assist them in their expanding array of research.

Level 9 is where the character reaches the pinnacle of their profession and occupies the highest leadership positions. In guilds, the character becomes a grandmaster, either leading the guild or with a place on the council, setting policy for the guild. Clerics become High Priests or Archbishops in charge of their religion's hierarchy for a region or realm. A Fighter would be promoted to general or granted lands to rule as the lord or lady of the land. Finally, a Magic-User would be known as a full wizard and widely respected for their knowledge and skill. They would attract many apprentices and fellow Magic-Users to learn and assist the wizard in their research.

At level 12, the character is considered a paragon of their profession, somebody whose skill and exploits are worthy of being used as an example for others to follow. In modern times, these characters would win the Nobel Prize or be Olympic-caliber athletes.

At level 16, the character becomes more than a paragon and moves into legendary status. Their deeds are famous through the continent or even the world. Consider these on par with our own world's Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Sun Tzu, Plato, or Aristotle.

The Consequence of Failure

Rolls are made when there are consequences for failure and when it can't be assumed that the character's competence can complete the task in the allocated time. This is nearly always true for things attempted during combat. It is also true for when there is no combat, but the results are uncertain such as trying to craft something intricate or persuading an NPC to a risky course of action.

The base chance of success is rolling a 15 or better using 1d20, or 30% chance of success. This may be further modified by a relevant attribute bonus representing innate skill, and an ability bonus representing training.



If the attempt is performed under exceptionally favorable circumstances, then the roll may be made with advantage; roll two d20s and take the highest result. For example, when climbing a sheer cliff, if you have best equipment you can buy, you may make the roll with advantage.

If the attempt is being performed under exceptionally unfavorable circumstances, then the roll may be made with disadvantage; roll two d20s and take the lowest results. For example, when climbing a sheer cliff during a blizzard, make the roll with disadvantage.

Finally, there is the rule of one. When the character has the time, resources, and experience to complete something with near-certain success, but failure is still a remote possibility, then have the character roll a d20. If they roll a 1, then they succeed but only after an embarrassing minor failure. This represents that things happen when you least expect it.



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Elements of a Ruling

These are the elements I use when crafting a ruling.

Armor Class

In a detailed system, armor is about mitigating and resisting damage. Due to how the classic editions were developed, Armor Class in the Majestic Fantasy RPG incorporates damage avoidance as well as resistance. This is a legacy of the system's origins in miniature wargaming, and the need to quickly resolve combat for dozens of units. When you need to consider whether an attack truly missed or was resisted by armor or shield, use the following guidelines.

Armor Class 9[10] means that the target has no form of damage resistance. Any failed to-hit roll literally misses the target. If the target has a better Armor Class as a result of their Dexterity bonus, then this number is adjusted by that Dexterity bonus. For example, Luven Lightfinger has a +2 Dexterity bonus. Any to-hit roll that fails to hit Armor Class 7[12] is considered a complete miss.

If the target is wearing armor, then they will get a bonus to their Armor Class that makes them resistant to injury. A to-hit roll that fails as result of the character wearing armor actually hits, but the damage is resisted by the armor. The character doesn't suffer any injury as a result.

Finally, if the character is wielding a shield or two weapons and the to-hit roll is missed by one, then the blow was successfully parried by their shield or off-hand weapon.

For example, Miriam is a warrior fighting in a battle. She has a Dexterity of 12 (+1 to AC), is wearing chainmail (+5 to AC), and is wielding a shield (+1 to AC). This gives her an Armor Class of 2[17]. Ascending AC is modified by adding the +7 bonus to 10; descending Armor Class is modified by subtracting the +7 bonus from AC 9. When making a to-hit roll, her opponent will completely miss if they roll an 11 or less. If the attacker rolls a 12 to a 15, they hit her armor, but the damage is resisted. Finally, Miriam parries the blow with her shield if a 16 is rolled.



Attribute Bonuses

Attributes represent a character's innate skill in one of six areas (Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma). The attribute score generates an attribute bonus ranging from -3 to +3. Typically, a new character will be rolled with bonuses ranging from -1 to +1 with one +2 bonus.

A key principle of the Majestic Fantasy RPG is that any character can attempt any action. One element that makes this work is allowing the player to apply their attribute bonus to what they roll, raising the odds of success from the base 30% chance. Use the description of the attribute to decide which of the six attributes is relevant to what the character is trying to do.



To-Hit Roll

The to-hit roll represents an attempt to deal damage to a target. A failed roll may or may not mean a complete miss depending on the factors outlined earlier under Armor Class.

The to-hit roll and Armor Class make resolving combat quick using these rules, even when multiple opponents are involved. Describing combat as a series of maneuvers and parries over six seconds makes sense for this situation. However, there are circumstances when the action is best described as a single attack. For example, if the target is holding a gem, the character may want to take a specific swing to shatter it.

You should tailor your description of the results of the to-hit roll based on the circumstances of combat and what the player is trying to do as their character. This will to make the session more enjoyable and help the players visualize the actions of their character better.

Hit Points

Hit points are a measure of combat endurance. They represent how long a character can continue to fight before they are incapacitated or dead.

The relationship between hit points and specific injuries is ambiguous due to the nature of its development from miniature wargaming. Miniature wargames used one-hit kills due to the focus on fighting entire battles. This was found to be too harsh in the early tabletop roleplaying campaigns, so one-hit kills were expanded to 1d6 hit points.

To adjudicate injuries and as an aide for verbally describing the results of a successful to-hit roll, I look at the proportion of damage dealt to total hit points. I describe the result of a 3 damage hit on a character with 6 HP in the same way I describe a 20 damage hit on a character with 40 HP.

For damage that is less than or equal to a quarter of the character's total hit points, I describe the injury as minor—a bruise or small cut, sometimes just a scratch if the damage is low enough. For damage that is more than a quarter but less than half of a character's total hit points, I describe the injury as serious—major cuts and bruises. For damage that is more than half of the character's total hit points, I describe the wound as grievous, with the character feeling lasting pain despite being able to fight on.

Movement

In general, a character can move five feet and face any direction without impairing their ability to do any other action, including ones that take a whole round of combat to complete. However, most actions require the character to move less than or equal to half of their move. Anything longer occupies the whole round of combat.



Non-Combat Tasks

Non-combat tasks are anything that doesn't involve a to-hit roll and where success is uncertain. The players need to describe what they do first, then roll second. This description allows you to consider their intent and whether this results in an advantage, disadvantage, or has no impact on the odds of success.

Often players are often not as knowledgeable as their character would be. If the player is missing an obvious detail that their character would know, then politely coach them on what they need to know.

Also, let them reconsider their action in light of this new information. This will allow the players to become more comfortable and be more proactive. The amount of times you will need to do this will vary on a case by case basis. In general, it is best to be generous until the player gains some experience with how the campaign is run. As the campaign progresses, players should need less coaching.

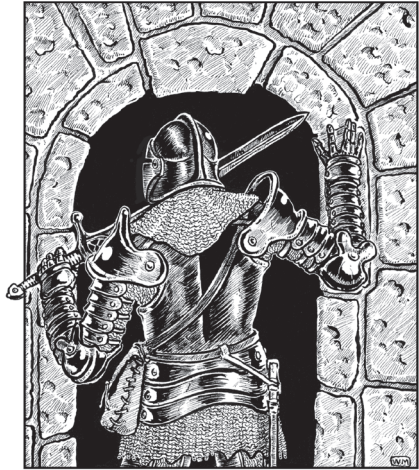
The technique is especially useful if the campaign has a lot of details on unique cultures and focuses on the player interacting with NPCs from these cultures.

Saving Throws

Saving throws exist to allow characters to avoid something unexpected that has negative consequences. The classic example is being caught in the area of effect of the Fireball spell, or stepping on the trap door of a pit trap. In each of these cases, the character gets to make a saving throw and either avoid the danger (pit trap) or mitigate it (the Fireball spell).

Saving throws are also useful as a mechanic for resolving special actions and stunts. Just like traps, many special actions often involve some type of negative consequence, putting a character (PC or NPC) at a disadvantage. For example, attempting to knock out a guard with a single blow or pulling down a stack of boxes to incapacitate a foe.

A to-hit roll followed by the target rolling a saving throw can be used as one way to adjudicate these situations, especially when experience is a factor for determining whether the target avoids danger. Saving throws get easier at higher levels and with higher hit dice. Rulings on special actions can be tailored by imposing advantage or disadvantage on the attacker's to-hit roll or on the target's saving throw.





The Rule of One

When the character has the time, resources, and experience to complete something with near-certain success, but failure is still remote possibility, then have the character roll a d20. If they roll a 1, then they succeed but only after an embarrassing minor failure. Why? Because these unexpected events are how life works. It is fun to incorporate this in a small way into a campaign despite the general focus on the fantastic. There have also been times when one of these occurrences took the campaign into an unexpected direction.



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