

# Bastard Sword

Down & Dirty House Rules  
for The Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game



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## What This Is

Bastard Sword is a collection of my house rules for The Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game that have accumulated in various notebooks over the years. You may have seen some of these rules elsewhere (in the past, I've made some of them available via other products) and may even be using some of them in your own game already (some of them I've picked up from playing with others over the last 24 years). These rules aren't fancy or complicated. I use them because they add an extra dash of flavor to the Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game without increasing my workload as a referee too much. I hope that you enjoy them!

Boxes like this one appear throughout Bastard Sword. Herein, I opine on the various inspirations for house rules and why I chose to implement them in my own game.

## Character Creation Options

### **Racial Bonuses**

Per the text of Rule Book One, elves gain a bonus when fighting certain types of creatures and halflings gain a bonus when utilizing missile weapons, though the text of that book refers the reader to the source wargame rules rather than listing these bonuses therein. For the purposes of these house rules, elves gain a +2 bonus to die rolls to hit when fighting goblinoid races (e.g., goblins, orcs, hobgoblins, etc) and halflings gain a +2 bonus to die rolls to hit when utilizing simple missile weapons (e.g., slings) in combat.

This particular rule came about as an attempt to reconcile the text in Rule Book One with the rules in the source wargame, modified for the Alternative Combat System, as it has been the preferred combat system in my groups over the years. The focus here was less on maths and more on simple utility.

### **Character Cultures**

The following option exists to add a little bit of background. A character's culture is the culture that a character was born to and raised up in (and that they abandoned to take up the mantle of an adventurer). A character's culture gives them an edge when resolving certain non-combat tasks (see Task Resolution on page four of these rules). Choose which one of the following three cultures your character hails from:

*Barbarians* are savage folk who grew up living off the land in the wild areas of the world. This lifestyle has made them tough beyond measure, capable of dealing with life's many hardships. A Barbarian's culture is useful when resolving related action (e.g., building a snare trap in the woods, starting a fire during a storm, tracking prey, etc.)

*Commoners* may live in the country or the city but, regardless, spring from the lower rungs of society and grew up working hard to earn a living plying a trade craft. Choose a specific trade craft to specialize in. A Commoner's craft is useful when resolving action related to it (e.g., building traps, farming crops, forging weapons, repairing armor, etc.)

*Aristocrats* grew up in the upper echelons of society and, as such, have the benefit of a wealthy upbringing. Typically they live in the city, although they may have grown up in a family owned castle or manor. An Aristocrat's former station is useful when resolving related action (e.g., bribing an official, impressing a fellow Aristocrat, negotiating a contract, etc.)

Character cultures are an option that I was introduced to by an old referee of mine (Thanks, Kurt!) in an advanced version of The Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game. When I started playing The Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game almost exclusively, character cultures got carried over, albeit in the less complex form presented here (and previously in my short run game, *Desperate & Hungry*).

As they existed originally, character cultures included explicit skill lists and were tied into non-weapon proficiencies, which made sense for the advanced game. This did not make so much sense here. I reduced the large-ish list of setting-specific character cultures and related skills down to what you see here, the goal being to present a cultural option that could easily fit into any traditional campaign with very little effort.

## Character Goals

When creating a character, you should define three short-term goals (e.g., earn enough money to buy that fancy hat, slay the bear eating Uncle Grampus' prize goats) for your character and one long-term goal (e.g., find and kill the man who murdered my father, recover the artifact sword from the ancient treasure vault of the Sorcerer King).

As a rule of thumb, short-term goals are things that can be achieved in a game session or three, while long-term goals should take weeks or months of actual play to achieve. Goals should be about what you, as a player, want out of the game for your character, signaling such to the Referee. The referee should do their best to work these goals into the campaign.

Character goals are actually a pretty recent addition to my collection of house rules, being inspired by "keys" in a roleplaying game published by Clinton R. Nixon circa 2004. While character goals, as presented here, are mechanically distinct from keys in that game, they fulfill much the same purpose – allowing players to explicitly tell the Referee what they want to achieve during a campaign and tying those desires directly to character advancement (see Goal-Oriented Leveling later in these rules).

## Options Outside of Combat

### **Task Resolution**

When a character attempts to perform an action or task outside of combat, their player shall roll a twenty-sided die and attempt to obtain a result lower than the ability rating that governs the action or task being resolved (as determined by the referee).

If the player rolls lower than the ability rating being tested, the character successfully performs the action or task being resolved. If the player fails to produce such a result (i.e., if they generate a result equal to or greater than the ability rating that governs the action or task being resolved), their character fails to successfully perform the action or task. Specific results are narrated by the referee as they deem appropriate.

A character's cultural learning (see Character Cultures on page one) benefits them while resolving non-combat tasks or actions related to that culture by providing a die roll modifier to task resolution rolls equal to half of their current character level rounded to the nearest whole number. For example, a 5<sup>th</sup> level character with the Aristocrat cultural background would subtract three ( $5/2 = 2.5$ ) from their twenty-sided die roll when attempting to bribe a local official, impress a fellow Aristocrat, negotiate a contract, etc.

I can't really claim any credit at all for the first two paragraphs of this house rule. My very first referee ever, James Thielen, often used this simple system to resolve non-combat action in our long running campaign (circa 1995). Since the advent of widespread Internet service, I learned that this particular house rule has seen worldwide use, spanning decades of actual play, so I suspect you've already seen it or even used it before. My contribution is comprised only of the third paragraph and, as mentioned on page two, even it is inspired by the work of those who came before me (so hats off to them).

The third paragraph here is important, as it is tied directly into character cultures. Specifically, this is the mechanical benefit one gains from using that particular character creation option in their games. When resolving non-combat action related to a character's cultural upbringing, that character has a better chance at succeeding. It's a small thing but it lends mechanical weight in actual play to who a character is, which is something that my own players have appreciated in our campaigns.

## Combat Clarifications & Options

### **Dying (Clarification)**

When a character's or creature's hit point total is reduced to zero or less, they are immediately struck down dead, being shuffled off the mortal coil.

This (i.e., that a character or creature dies when their hit points are reduced to zero or less) isn't *clearly* stated in Rule Book One but this is how I've always played and run it. It's simple and deadly, just the way I like it.

## Acting Order in Combat

The character with the highest Dexterity always strikes first, with other participants acting in descending order of Dexterity ratings. Should two characters have the same Dexterity rating, the DM should roll 1d6 for each – the character for whom the highest result is produced acts before the other (re-roll ties). Finally, monster Dexterity ratings should be rolled on the spot by the Referee, using the standard 3d6 method described in Rule Book One. A character or creature only has one action per combat turn, unless otherwise noted.

This rule has been with me for a very long time. It's a minor revision of the same rules for such things present in the Holmes edit of the later, basic, version of The Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game. There's really nothing original here, other than some minor re-wording, though we use this rule in our Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game campaigns because the Alternative Combat System, as it appears in Rule Book One, is *very* bare bones and makes no allowances for things like determining acting order in combat.

## Yielding and Retreat

A character engaged in melee may yield to their opponent, though their opponent does not have to accept such a resignation. Similarly, a character or creature may choose to retreat from combat. Should a character or creature choose to retreat from combat with an opponent rather than make an appeal for mercy, said opponent gains a free swing at the fleeing character or creature with a bonus of + 2 added to his hit roll. Only sapient beings can make a plea for mercy, though all combatants have the option to flee.

Another debt to Eric Holmes is owed here as this rule is, again, mostly a restatement of the same rules for such things in the basic version of The Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game published under his editorial oversight. It appears here for the same reason that the previous rules do – there simply isn't a comparative rule in Rule Book One with regard to the Alternative Combat System. So I borrowed one.

## Going On Full Defense

A player can, if they so wish, declare at the beginning of a combat turn that their character is going on Full Defense. In doing so, they gain the option to parry or dodge (whichever is appropriate given the attack type and weapons or armor the defending character is equipped with) any incoming attacks during a combat turn. Doing so levies a -2 penalty to

the attack roll of their opponents but *also* robs the defending character of the ability to attack on that turn. Note that, if a shield is used to parry in this fashion, it is considered to have been dealt a blow if using the Advanced Armor Rules below.

## Cautious Stance

This is the default combat stance of a character utilizing these house rules. A character who assumes this stance for a combat turn gets to make the standard one attack *and* may parry or dodge (again, whichever is appropriate given the attack type and what weapons or armor the character is equipped with) *one* incoming attack, levying the same -2 penalty on that attack roll, as discussed above.

## Going On Full Offense

Much as a player can declare that their character is going on Full Defense, they may also declare at the beginning of a combat turn that their character is going on Full Offense. In doing so, a character gains an extra attack roll on that turn (for a total of two attacks) *and* a +2 bonus to those attack rolls – but any opponents attacking *them* also gain that same bonus on their attack rolls (such is the risk of sacrificing one's defense for all-out offense).

Combat stances have been influenced by a *lot* of sources and a *lot* of people who came before me – there's some Holmes DNA in there (specifically with regard to the rules for parrying and dodging), a bit of Greg Stolze (the idea of combat stances itself is cribbed from his work on a game about a samurai rabbit), and no small amount of input from many, *many*, people I have gamed with over the years.

Combat stances are provided here as optional rules to spice up the Alternative Combat System as, again, the system in question is very bare bones as presented in Rule Book One. I don't always use these rules, though they do see heavy rotation when I'm trying to achieve a more grounded feel for my campaign.

## Advanced Armor Rules

Armor comes in Light, Medium, and Heavy varieties. Each piece of Light armor (e.g., leather armor) can sustain 3 blows before it needs to be repaired and no longer provides sufficient protection. Each piece of Medium armor (e.g., chain mail, shield) worn can sustain 5 blows before it needs to be repaired and no longer provides sufficient protection. Each piece of Heavy armor (e.g., full plate) worn can sustain 8 blows before it needs to be repaired and no longer provides sufficient protection.

These rules, by default, only concern themselves with the armor types referenced in Rule Book One's discussion of the Alternative Combat System (hence, no helmets) but it's pretty easy to slot other armor pieces or types into the Light/Medium/Heavy armor hierarchy. For example, you may make allowances for different sizes of shields or things such as barding (as it appears on the equipment list in Rule Book One).

The advanced rules for armor are actually an original creation of mine, although they've been influenced by many an old computer game. I spent a *huge* amount of time playing early fantasy adventure games on the family computer (a C64 and, later, an IBM 486) as a kid and I can't deny the impact that they had on me. So here we are. Like the rules for combat stances, I don't always use these additional rules for armor – but they're great for adding a low fantasy veneer to the game when you want it.

## Advanced Weapon Rules

Weapons also come in Light, Medium, and Heavy varieties. When successfully striking with a Light weapon (e.g., Dagger, Hand Axe, Short Bow) in combat, roll 2d6 to determine damage and take the lowest result. When successfully striking with a Medium weapon (e.g., Mace, Long Bow, Sword) in combat, roll 1d6 as normal to determine damage. When successfully striking with a Heavy weapon (e.g., Composite Bow, Halberd, Two-Handed Sword) in combat, roll 2d6 to determine damage and take the highest result.

Like armor, weapons can also be damaged in combat. Any time that a hit is scored with a weapon on a roll result of natural 20 (i.e., a result of 20 on the die) or a weapon is used to parry (see the rules for combat stances on pages four and five) against a roll result of natural 20, roll two six-sided dice. If the result of this roll is snake eyes (a result of two 1s), the weapon in question has been broken and needs to be repaired before it is good as anything other than an improvised weapon (see the paragraph below).

Finally, sometimes a character will not find themselves with a proper weapon at hand, or will find themselves unarmed. In such circumstances, rolls to hit are made as normal, but damage rolls are made on a two-sided die (roll 1d6, results of 1-3 = 1, results of 4-6 = 2).

The rules for variable weapon damage presented here are inspired by a set of much older house rules that a group I played with in the mid-1990s used for an advanced version of The Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game. Specifically, we allowed players of characters wielding two-handed weapons to roll two weapon damage dice and keep the highest result. When I started running The Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game, I simply implemented a variation of that rule to apply to different sizes of weapons.

As to the rules for weapon breakage, these rules were inspired directly by Hollywood films. Have you ever seen a film where a mighty blow with a weapon (usually a sword) causes it to shatter? I've seen quite a few such films and I wanted that feel of 'epic' combat in games at my table, so I implemented this rule, bringing a bit of that Hollywood magic to my campaigns.

The final rule here regarding unarmed and improvised weapon damage in combat has been borrowed from a dozen (or more) games. Everybody else did it first, I just adapted it along the way as it's sharp, simple, and filled a need at my table. But seriously, this rule is 100% stolen from a lot of other people.

# Character Advancement Options

## Goal-Oriented Leveling

Instead of characters leveling by gaining experience points (XP) as explained at length in Rule Book One, characters created using these house rules level when they achieve their goals as defined in character creation (see Character Goals on page two). When a character achieves three of their short-term goals, they gain a level. Likewise, when one long-term goal is achieved, a character gains a level.

Whenever a character achieves a short-term goal, their player needs to define a new short-term goal to take its place. Similarly, when a character achieves a long-term goal, their player needs to define a new long-term goal.

Goal-oriented leveling has its roots in two places. First, as discussed on page two, the concept of character goals and their ties to leveling are directly influenced by Clinton R. Nixon's game. Second, somewhere along the way, I read an interview with Dave Arneson in which he explained that characters in his campaigns didn't necessarily gain XP from killing monsters or amassing gold but, instead, from doing things that related directly to their professions (the example I specifically recall is that a scholar gained XP from doing scholarly things, rather than killing monsters).

In implementing goal-oriented leveling in my campaigns, I similarly link character advancement to specific achievements that players defined for their characters, rather than exclusively killing things and taking stuff (although note that goals of killing things and taking stuff are still valid using this system). I simply wanted the option for multi-faceted character advancement for players to pursue, if they wanted to.

## Alternate Hit Dice

When a character gains a level in their class as outlined above, their player rolls the prescribed number of Dice for Accumulative Hits for their new level as shown in Rule Book One, taking any modifiers into consideration. Under this system, however, players do NOT add the result of this die roll to their character's current hit point total. Instead, if the new total generated is *greater* than their character's current hit point total, they replace the old total with the new total. If the new total generated is *less* than their character's current hit point total, they ignore the roll result and the character's hit point total remains unchanged.

There are a number of us for whom hit point bloat is a bug, rather than a feature. This rule exists for folks like us. Having said that, be aware that using this rule in your campaigns makes PCs *very* mortal. If you're the referee, you should remind the other players of this whenever you can, as it makes for a *very* different kind of campaign than playing The Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game out of the box does.

## Parting Shots

These are the *main* house rules I utilize when running campaigns of The Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game. There are, however, house rules that I have *not* included here and that those of you who have played with me will immediately recognize as missing. This is deliberate. These missing rules (e.g., no clerics, magic-users cast all the spells, etc) were omitted here because I felt that they alter the base game *too* much. While the rules that I have included here do certainly alter the base game, I feel that the game is still recognizably The Original Fantasy Roleplaying Game, even with all of these rules in play.



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