

ADJUDICATING TRAPS

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“We move along the corridor, one 10’ square at a time, with the dwarf and the thief checking every square as we advance.”

Many a referee has heard such phrases and shuddered. While some groups enjoy this meticulous, “search every inch” approach to dungeon exploration, for others it quickly becomes a tedious crawl.

This article delves into the role of traps in the game, with advice for the referee on how to keep them engaging and fun.

The Role of Traps in the Game

Along with treasure, monsters, and puzzles, traps are one of the core elements of old-school dungeons, so it’s useful to look at the role they play in the game.

Risk / resource trade-off: Searching an area or object for traps takes 1 turn. Searching for a turn has two side-effects: firstly, the party’s resources (e.g. light, spell durations) diminish; secondly, a wandering monster check may result in a potentially dangerous encounter. Players must therefore balance the potential benefits of searching against these downsides. This trade-off is one reason why resource tracking and wandering monsters are essential elements of old-school play.

Exploration challenges: Once a trap has been located (either by searching or by characters falling foul of it), it presents an interesting exploration challenge to the party: how do we disable or bypass this trap? For players who enjoy puzzles and exploration, figuring out how to bypass or disable traps can be one of the most fun aspects of the game.

Rolling Dice

Old-School Essentials provides rules for rolling dice to find or remove traps: all characters can search for room traps and thieves have a special class ability allowing them to find or remove treasure traps.

Pros: Rolling dice to search for traps can be resolved very quickly. The players simply inform the referee that they’re going to spend a turn searching one or more specific areas, the referee marks the advancement of time, rolls dice for each character searching, rolls a wandering monster check (if applicable), and informs the players of the results.

Cons: The chance of finding traps by rolling dice tends to be low. Most characters have a mere 1-in-6 chance of finding a room trap; low-level thieves likewise have a very low chance of finding treasure traps. A party who relies on this method of finding traps is likely to fall into many.

Removing room traps: The rules do not provide any roll to remove room traps; these can *only* be bypassed / disabled by *Narrative Interaction*.



Narrative Interaction

Players may try to find, bypass, or disable traps by describing their actions in the imagined world. PCs can thus often deal with traps without rolling dice, relying instead on the referee's adjudication of actions based on knowledge of the workings of any traps present. Some examples:

- ▶ Water poured over a floor may trickle down cracks, revealing a pit trap.
- ▶ A heavy object thrown onto a section of floor may trigger a pressure plate.
- ▶ Smashing the lock of a chest with a war hammer may destroy a delicate poison dart trap without triggering it.
- ▶ Tapping ahead with a 10' pole may trigger a tripwire.

Pros: Handling traps via narrative interaction is often very effective, parties being able to detect and avoid traps purely by clever tactics, without risking recourse to random dice rolls. Devising cunning ploys for discovering traps and harebrained schemes for bypassing them is also often a lot of fun.

Cons: Detailed narrative interaction with the dungeon environment can take time (real time, that is, not game time). This is an aspect of the game which many players find very enjoyable, however, so it is not time wasted.

Time: The referee must judge how much time passes while using such methods.

Making Traps Fun

Clues / Telegraphing

A great way to emphasise the role of traps as a fun exploration challenge is to place clues as to their presence. Some examples:

- ▶ Characters notice a chemical odour (emanating from a pit filled with acid).
- ▶ A bisected skeleton lays on the floor (killed by a nearby scything blade trap).

Traps Failing to Spring

Old-School Essentials notes that every time a character makes an action that could trigger a trap, there is a 2-in-6 chance of the trap being sprung.

Optionally, when a trap fails to spring, the referee may give players a clue as to its presence. For example, they may hear a click or feel the movement of a pressure plate, as the (presumably old / rusty) trap is almost but not quite fully triggered.

Verisimilitude

Another simple way to give players hints as to where to search for traps (thus avoiding the “we search every square” approach) is to place them in locations that make sense, given the layout and inhabitants of a dungeon. Some examples:

- ▶ Doors to treasure vaults or important tombs may be guarded with traps.
- ▶ Monsters are unlikely to place traps in corridors which they frequently traverse.

If this approach is used consistently (in appropriate dungeons), clever players can gain knowledge of traps in advance by charming monsters, interrogating captured dungeon denizens, and so forth.

Non-Lethal Traps

Not all traps need to kill or inflict damage. Traps which cause interesting problems for the party can be a lot of fun. Some examples:

- ▶ Characters are trapped in a net for capture by intelligent monsters.
- ▶ A trap transports characters to a hidden or dangerous part of the dungeon.

Savouring Character Death

Finally, it is important to note that character death is an intrinsic part of old-school play, especially at lower experience levels. Players are advised to learn to enjoy the tragic, comedic, or gruesome deaths of their characters.