Why 1st Edition D&D Sucks

Every time a new edition comes out, lots of people complain about how bad the new rules are. “It doesn’t feel like D&D anymore” is a common one. “They’re trying to make it like [insert current popular computer game here]” is another. Trust me—you’re not the first person to say that.

For that matter, “First edition” D&D wasn’t the first rules set of the game. It was at least the third and arguably the fourth.

Chainmail was published in 1971. It was essentially a miniatures game, but it had a 12-page “Fantasy Supplement” and the central elements of what was to become D&D. You could play an ongoing campaign (and people did) that was substantially similar to how people played once the official D&D name was tacked on.

The woodgrain box set (now called OD&D, for Original) came out in January of 1974. This version went through six or more printings before the Monster Manual came out in 1977. Given how many printings it went through, and the nature of RPGs, in which not everybody at the table owns a rulebook, tens of thousands of gamers were already using this version when the hardbacks started hitting the shelves.

The OD&D Supplements (Greyhawk, Blackmoor, Eldritch Wizardy, Swords and Spells, and Gods, Demigods and Heroes) were released between 1975 and 1978. They substantially modified the box set rules. They added the paladin, thief, monk, druid, and assassin classes. They added psionics rules and other rules that were later left out (hit locations, for example).

The Basic set came out in early 1977 (the first printing of the MM was in December). Although the Basic and Advanced versions of the game went in different directions, which means that this release is not exactly on a linear path to First Edition, you could argue that this counts as an edition. In any case, a Monster Manual is not a rules set. The 1e Players Handbook didn't hit the shelves until June 1978, which means this edition predates “first edition”.

Given this history, “First Edition” had the same issues with its previous players as 2nd edition, 3rd and 4th all had with players who started before those revisions took place. People thought that printing hardback books was a specious money-grab. Digest-sized books with bad art were as high-end as the game needed. Insert tired, invalid arguments here.

Apparently, whatever version some people start with is the best ever.

Don’t think that changes are always improvements? I agree. They’re not always better. However, a great many of them are. Earlier versions of the game had characters rerolling their hit points for each game session. Go back to using regular dice instead of polyhedrals. I dare you. Initiative was determined solely by your Dexterity score. If you want to be a purist, go back to that nonsense.

First edition had its flaws, too. While you might not like all of the changes in the game since then, a look back at some of the rules might reveal exactly how superior later versions came to be. Taken as a whole, I think the game has improved.

In this work, I'm going to point out some flaws, describe why they matter and suggest a fix. My goal is to retain as much 1e flavor as I can, which means that some level of brokenness can't be fixed, only jury-rigged into a workable system. As always, I look for in-game precedents first, then other existing solutions (in other games or other versions), and then create a new method if all else fails.
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Character Creation

The Issue: Meaningless ability scores
The Problem: First edition featured an 8-point range of meaningless ability scores. Strength scores of roughly 8 to 14 were identical in combat. The difference affected how much you could carry or your chance to lift a gate (random much?). Also, different numbers give different benefits for different abilities. An 18 Strength gives +1 on attack but +2 on damage. An 18 Dexterity gives +3 on initiative but +4 to AC.

Related Issue: For that matter, the importance of the ability scores differed dramatically by class. If you were a fighter, you needed 3 high scores—Strength, Dexterity, and Constitution. If you were a magic-user, you only needed one to do your job. Dex and Con helped defensively, but they didn’t make you a better magic-user.

Related Issue: Inconsistent rules for similar effects
The Problem: We have a percentile chance of lifting gates, and a d6 bonus for smashing open locked doors (except at higher levels, when it became d20-based). Why don’t bursting locked doors and gate-lifting use the same game mechanic? At the time I just went with it. Once I looked at it with an eye toward simplifying and streamlining game mechanics, it became bothersome.

You can simplify the mechanic within the framework of 1e rules. You could, for example, make the chance to do something heroic an attack roll and give each specific obstacle a target number (you would call it an AC in this case). Busting open King Snurre’s locked treasure chest requires an unarmed attack against AC –4, for example. If you didn’t want to incorporate the character’s level into your chance of success, make it a simple Strength check and apply a modifier to the difficulty.

Related Issue: “Below this point, you can only be an x.”
The Problem: Each ability score had a threshold below which you could only be a member of a single class. With Con 4, you can only be an illusionist. It's pointless and random. Okay, it's not random. There were reasons, but they were ridiculous. If a player wants to play a fighter with a Con of 3, let him. This is an issue that game play will fix by killing these poorly-designed characters.
The Fix: Ditch the whole concept.

Related Issue: Ability score minimums and maximums by race
Related Issue: Different ability maximums for males and females
The Problem: Some of the minimums and maximums were inconsistent with the description of the races. Elves have a Constitution penalty compared to humans but a higher minimum Con than humans. Halflings had low Strength caps but they had a higher minimum than humans. Females were gimped across the board on Strength. Female halflings had a maximum Strength of 14! That means that halfling fighters couldn't have any attack or damage bonus at all.
The Fix: Ditch the whole concept.
Related Issue: Exceptional Strength (that is, a Strength score of 1-100 after rolling an 18) is also needlessly different. It complicated things like magical Strength gains. It also gave characters enormous difference in performance. If one player rolls 17 for Strength, he attacks with +1/+1 for life, unless he gains one of several magic items to increase his Strength or he becomes the target of a spell that increases Strength. His buddy who rolls 1 point higher gains an additional roll that can increase his damage potential by another +5, and his attack by another +2.

The Fix: Adopt the ability score progression from basic D&D (or, more appropriately, the Rules Cyclopedia). It doesn’t completely fix the long lag between ability score bonuses, but it reduces the no-gain range and makes all the ability scores consistent. This removes an edge from the melee classes, but we can address that issue separately. Or is it even an issue? The Rules Cyclopedia allowed it without a fix.

The Issue: Class/race restrictions

The Problem: I understand that the designers wanted to encourage certain combinations from fantasy fiction and folklore. Removing the sometimes arbitrary restrictions allows much more player choice and world variety.

The Fix: I prefer rules that favor a desired class/race combination over rules that prohibit an undesired combination. Elves get an Int bonus, so they’re good wizards, for example. You can play a dwarf wizard, but you won’t get that bonus, and your melee combat bonus is wasted.

Likewise, multi-class rules for what race could be what class were cumbersome. If you’re going to allow multi-classing, offer blanket rules rather than specific allowances. An example might be: any race can take two classes. Half-elites can take three as a racial advantage.

The Issue: Multi-classing

The Problem: Because of the way the experience point tables progressed throughout most levels of play, multi-classed characters lagged only slightly behind their peers. However, they gained the full offensive capabilities of both classes. Because the major restrictions on classes involved armor (magic spells required no armor and thieving functions allowed only leather), combining two classes of similar proficiencies gave you the maximum benefit at minimal cost. Fighter/clerics or magic-user/thieves are good examples. The thief suffered only slightly by not wearing armor so that he could cast magic spells. The character gained access to all of the thief’s exclusive skills and also the wizard’s vast repertoire of powers.

The Fix: I don’t know yet. Trying to implement a 3e style system of free multi-classing requires revising the entire character advancement and rules system to a degree I’m not willing to do here.

Related Issue: NPCs had different ability score modifiers

The Problem: How does that even happen? Page 100 of the DMG showed the ability score modifiers for random NPCs. They did not match the ones in the PH. In a game that placed a high value on in-game “realism”, that doesn't make sense.

The Fix: They match now.
Character Advancement

The Issue: Racial level limits
The Problem: I know the goal was to give humans a bonus, but give them something other than exclusive access to higher levels. The rationale for why elves couldn’t advance to high level in magic use was strained. That’s the most obvious example, but in general, the races couldn’t max out their archetypal classes. And almost any class could advance indefinitely as thieves. Why?

Humans already outnumber all the other races many times over. It makes sense that in a society of 50,000 individuals, you won’t have many characters over 9th or 12th level or whatever. However, in a nation of 30,000,000 humans, you’ll have quite a few characters of high level. Your fictional setting has already justified the lack of higher-level nonhumans among your overall NPC population.

You won’t have enough high-level PCs to skew the setting’s figures, even if they all become 20th level halfling clerics.

Worse, game balance between characters suffered. A gnomish illusionist/thief, for example, was a versatile, potent character at what he did. He far outshone a thief of equal level or even one level ahead. Multi-classed characters were substantially better overall than single-class characters of the same level.

Until they capped out. Somewhere between (usually) 7th and 11th, demihumans stopped contributing to play. When the human characters were all 12th level, the 4th level half-orc cleric might as well have been a torchbearer, not a full, contributing PC.

The Fix: Remove them. Give humans another kind of bonus. What kind of bonus? Well, without feats or other build options, you can't give them that. Humans are allegedly versatile and adaptable. They could gain a minor experience point bonus. A 5% gain means that, every once in a while, the human character is a level higher than his demi-human counterparts. It's a feel-good bonus for the players of the humans, but it doesn't imbalance the game. In reality, it doesn't make up for the huge ability packages that demi-humans gain.

Instead, humans might be able to adjust their starting statistics, the way that Basic D&D allowed. If you want to play a magic-user, but your rolled Intelligence score was unimpressive, lower your Strength and raise your Intelligence.

The Issue: Experience point tables
The Problem: Varying experience point progression was allegedly a balancing factor, but it failed in that regard. Characters were rarely more than a level off, except at the very highest level. This topic is very closely tied to class balance.

The Fix: Use one experience point table. The fighter’s table seems to be the most uniform at all level ranges and is close to the average of the basic classes. Every class could use it with no harm and a gain in ease of play.

The Issue: Identity crises
The Problem: Thieves and assassins were virtually identical. Assassins could use shields and had access to more weapons (but because all weapons were not created equal, they usually used weapons available to the thief). Assassins acted as thieves of 2 levels lower, otherwise using the same table. Assassins had horrible racial limitations. Assassins had a long table identifying their
chance of automatically murdering a sleeping or otherwise helpless victim. It was meant for NPC activity, however, and DMs were urged to role-play out assassinations by PCs.

For that matter, several classes had identity problems. Druids and rangers shared a number of powers. Magic-users and illusionists were almost the same class, except that illusionists were far more restricted in their spell selection.

Magic-users suffered another form of identity problem. “Magic-user”? Seriously? For a game that included 23 different pole arms in its core rules, you’d expect a more evocative name for the primary spell-flinging class.

**The Fix**: Remove the assassin class and leave it for an expansion or give it a completely different design. Besides, the concept of “person who kills people for money” pretty much applies to all PCs anyway. PC barter boils down to “We don’t have cash for this *raise dead* spell, but do you have anybody you need whacked?”

Magic-users are easy. They’re now mages or wizards or whatever. Anything but “magic-user.” Ugh.

Rangers could have some druidic spells, but you risk the same problem of identity blurring. Rangers should (ideally) have ranger spells or specific class powers/features instead. Personally, I don't like the idea of rangers as a spellcasting class.

**The Issue**: Dual-classing

**The Problem**: The rules were hard to qualify for, your character was seriously nerfed for a long period of time, and the end result was only useful for specific class combinations. The whole thing was distasteful. It only applied to humans—clearly another way to make humans unique. It was a bad way.

**The Fix**: Remove dual-classing. Make humans special in some other way.

**The Issue**: Level training

**The Problem**: You get a finite amount of wealth, an amount which varies according to the DM. Then you have to spend a large amount of it on training—even though, for some classes, the gain in character ability was minimal. Fighters gained nothing but hit points for half their levels, with those few exceptions where they gained additional attacks/round or non-combat benefits like followers and taxes. The training time was more bothersome to me. If my character advanced before yours (which some of them did, thanks to the varying xp tables), then I might have to sit out for real-time *weeks* of game play while my buddy kept playing. Then you and I would switch. I don’t know how many people followed that rule, but it was there.

In fact, it wasn't even possible using the rules as written. 1st-level character advancing to 2nd level spend 1,500 to 6,000 gp advancing (DMG 86). You didn't earn that much gold during your first level. You might not have earned that much by 4th level. How did nobody notice this?

**The Fix**: Remove it.

**The Issue**: Experience point limits

**The Problem**: You were limited in experience point gains for an adventure. How limited? Well, you couldn't get more than enough to advance you a level. Here's the appropriate cite:
ONCE A CHARACTER HAS POINTS WHICH ARE EQUAL TO OR GREATER THAN THE MINIMUM NUMBER NECESSARY TO MOVE UPWARDS IN EXPERIENCE LEVEL, NO FURTHER EXPERIENCE POINTS CAN BE GAINED UNTIL THE CHARACTER ACTUALLY GAINS THE NEW LEVEL.

Seriously? Is the issue so important that it needs to be written in all caps?

**The Fix:** The problem isn't that I think you should be able to go up multiple levels from a single reward. The problem is that I don't think xp rewards should be large enough to propel you up more than a single level in one go. I don't think the problem is with the xp amounts, but when the game assumed that the rewards would be given.

Assign experience at the end of each night's play, rather than at the end of a long, multi-session adventure. In fact, for home play, you can pre-calculate the rewards for each encounter, include it in your notes and assign xp rewards after each encounter.
Races

The Issue: Racial balance

The Problem: Part of the idea of game balance in 1e was that demihumans had some good racial benefits that they enjoyed from the beginning, but humans had the benefit of unlimited leveling in any class.

That's not balance. That means that, at low level, the demihuman characters are better than humans. At high levels, the humans are better. After all, if you're a 15\textsuperscript{th} level fighter, and your elf buddy with the same experience point total is only 7\textsuperscript{th} level, you win. There's no balance.

Multi-classing exacerbated this problem, ramping up the demihumans further at low level.

The Fix: You could strip away powers from the demihumans until they match the humans, but that would take away the flavor of those races, too. If that's not an option, you have to go in the other direction: give humans advantages that makes them equal to the demihumans.
Classes In General

The Issue: Class balance

The Problem: In combat contribution, thieves lagged behind all other classes. In dungeon exploration, thieves shone—but so did the spellcasting classes. Low-level thieves almost certainly failed at every check but climbing walls, and the certainty of the spellcasters’ abilities made them far superior at environmental challenges. You don't have to roll for *spider climb* or *levitate*.

Likewise, magic-users began pitifully weak and ended up being the most powerful characters in the game. This class difference created some dynamics that were staples of the game and had cognates in the military miniatures rules that were the forerunner of D&D. If fighters were seen as the infantry units, magic-users were artillery pieces—immobile and terrible at hand-to-hand but capable of devastating damage. The fighters run forward and engage the enemy, whittling them down. Clerics sustain the fighters, thieves look for a chance to flank the enemy and cut them down, and magic-users remove dangerous threats or lay down ferocious firepower.

But at low levels, this “ferocious firepower” might be a single magic missile for 1d4+1 damage. Melee damage is consistent, not limited to one time per day. It’s also greater in value—a fighter with 17 Strength inflicts 1d8+1 points of damage with his sword. A one-time use action should have more impact than an action you can use every round.

Class balance is tied to character role, a focus discussed in detail in 4e but addressed even back in 1e—just not by that name. Even in 1e, everyone knew his or her role in combat. Fighters tank, clerics heal, magic-users fling fiery death, and thieves sneak around and try to backstab. In 1e, there was a much greater emphasis on exploration, or conflict with the environment.

Characters weak in combat might contribute outside of combat and thus gain value. All characters shouldn’t be equal in offensive capability, so comparing them in that way is misleading. Characters shouldn’t be equal in defense, and the same applies.

The Fix: The fix is complicated and tied to other issues (see Varying Spell Value). I’m choosing to fix it subtly, by fixing specific powers that tend to exaggerate the issue rather than giving magic-users a basic class overhaul, for example. Broadening the thief’s backstab ability to make it easier to use gives the thief class some of the oomph it needs.

The Issue: Followers

The Problem: The rules were very vague, which was fine in some regards. However, they varied greatly with little explanation as to why. Also, they were worthless in combat. A monster that was a challenge for a 9th level fighter could wipe out all of the fighter's followers in a single round if it had an area attack. The followers could factor into squad- or platoon-level combat, but when did that happen? If it did, certain classes had no contribution at all because they had no followers.

The Fix: Remove the concept of followers and place a little more emphasis on describing the entirety of the fiefdoms. What happens to a non-follower class that builds a keep or fortress? Can't he gain any followers? Just like non-thieves have a reduced chance to hear a noise or pick a pocket, non-follower classes should be able to gain some lesser benefit from fortifying a territory.
The Issue: Character hit dice

The Problem: Again, the game introduces needless complexity. Why did one class gain 11 dice of hit points and another only 9? Classes that gained 1d10 hp + Con when gaining HD started gaining 3 hp when they gained hit points. With the core character-generation methods, having multiple ability scores that were very high was rare, and Constitution was nobody’s highest stat. Thus, the difference between the average die roll and the fixed amount gained was minimal. Also, The monsters didn’t stop gaining hit dice, and their upper level is far higher than the PCs’ maximum.

The Fix: Remove the limits on hit dice and equate them with levels. If you’re 15th level, you have 15 HD. It’s more intuitive and it gives the PCs a gratifying benefit on reaching higher levels. They get to roll a die and cheer or bemoan the results. This substantially changes the higher-level play dynamics, but that's easily fixed by increasing the threat level of a few monsters.

The Problem: Class level limits

The Problem: Some classes topped out at 14, 15, or 17, while others had rules for up to 20th level. I never did see a reason for that.

The Fix: Easy enough. Everybody goes to 20. This means you need to stretch out some classes a bit, but since we're taking away a couple of classes, it's not that much work.

The Issue: Competition for levels

The Problem: Certain character classes had to compete in-game for the right to earn certain levels. Characters might literally lose *half a million* earned experience points through various aspects of this mechanism. That has to go.

The Fix: Character power is tied to character level and character-building choices like spells and gear. Character importance in the game setting is tied to DM direction, character actions, and party success. It could be tied to character building choices like feats, but social power and character combat power should be separate things. One is a game balance issue, and the other is a role-playing issue.

Different players have different expectations out of the game regarding how much attention and immersion they get. If one player wants to advance in association rank and not just character level, the DM should allow it as long as it serves his goal, and there are accompanying challenges—often meaning adventures, but it could mean other in-game things, too.

The Issue: Ability score requirements

The Problem: Rolling up a paladin (or ranger or monk) was almost impossible. Therefore, if you wanted to play a paladin, your DM often said something like “Give yourself a 17 Charisma and roll the rest”. Voila, you’re a paladin. The artificial rules limitation of requiring rare dice rolls was resolved by a human-nature fix.

The reason behind the requirement was so that these characters would be rare. Game design assumed that these special characters were more powerful than their easier-to-qualify-for counterparts. In truth, they weren't.
This problem is like the problem of high-level characters. Certain character types, like paladins, might be very rare within the campaign world, but that shouldn't limit player choice. Players are already assumed to be exceptional in some regards anyway. The number of player characters relative to the number of NPCs in the game means that even if every PC in a given world was a paladin, the number of paladins in the game would still be unchanged. If you want to be one of those rare paladins, be one. If you want to be a rare valley elf, roll one up. Have fun.

Besides, if you allow characters with lower ability scores, those characters have an inherent disadvantage because some class features are based on those ability scores.

The Fix: Out with 'em!

The Issue: Level titles
The Problem: Each level of each class had a different name associated with it. A beginning fighter was a veteran, then a warrior, then a swordsman. The cleric's titles switched religions indiscriminately. I get that they were an attempt to give in-game language to game concepts, but the whole thing was poorly executed.

The Fix: Removing them would be best. If you want to give in-game language to characters of different level, you could “block” them. Low-level characters have one title, medium-level characters another, and high-level characters a third. For best effect, though, they would vary by culture, leading you to a long sequence of titles changing by locale.

This still leaves issues. Joe Peasant can’t visually tell the difference between a fighter and a ranger or a paladin and a cleric. When he uses the term “Veteran”, it means a person who has seen combat. You can't meaningfully use these terms in character because there's no way for a character to distinguish between a 4\textsuperscript{th} level fighter and a 5\textsuperscript{th} level fighter. It doesn't make any sense.
Specific Classes

Cleric
The reasoning against edged weapons was faulty. Blunt weapons can tear flesh and cause bloodshed. Clerics could also use spells like blade barrier, which splatters blood like a Quentin Tarantino movie. There were rules for using the “flat of the blade” with edged weapons, but clerics weren't allowed that.

The restriction, even if it were valid, is also a social construct. I can’t think of a single moral that’s shared by the religious people of all faiths, especially in a fantasy world where people worship lizard-things, lobster-women and pillars of slime. Asserting that all clerics are opposed to the shedding of blood would surely confuse an Aztec priest who was holding a human heart in his hand while he listened to your argument.

If you want to limit a cleric's weapon choices, there are a couple of ways to go. The method that makes the most sense in the game is to restrict choices by the dictates of the god the cleric worships. However, that's cumbersome. It requires making up new weapon lists for each of dozens of gods.

A simpler route would be to limit the weapons by identifying some weapons as easy to learn. 3E's “simple weapon” and “martial weapon” classification took this route. However, in a 1e style, it might be best to simply identify specific weapons by name (incidentally, 4e does this somewhat, too). The cleric can learn the spear, club, staff, sling, crossbow, and a few others, for example. Basically, no sword. This keeps most d8 weapons out of the cleric's hands, leaving them for the fighters.

Druid
Druids have the generic issues of a level progression at higher levels, but that's fixed elsewhere. That leaves...not much. The druid has a good mix of spells.

Druids were secondary healers, as they should be. Druids had a variety of roles they could fill. Their main liability was spell variety preventing total specialization, and that's not a game-breaker. Their shape-changing power was not the insane combat gain that it turned into in 3e. It allowed the cleric to spy on enemies by going unnoticed and the ability to bypass obstacles like rivers or fences.

Their main issue was the on/off nature of their powers. Outdoors, the druid was substantially more powerful than he was underground. Here's the deal, though—for the most part, the DM chooses where encounters take place. The DM chooses to allow the druid to use his powers well or not to use his powers well. Druid class features and spells should be only marginally limited by the presence of a ceiling, if at all.

Otherwise, the druid is probably the most solid of all the 1e classes.

Fighter
Fighters had no character customization options aside from gear, and all weapons aren’t equal. Your main character-building choice is whether to use a one-handed sword and a shield or use a two-handed weapon. In combat, there’s no question about what you were doing, only who you were doing it to. You’re going to swing your sword. You had no feats, maneuvers, exploits,
powers, or options. You had “I attack”. For added variety, sometimes your sentence had an object in it. You didn’t even have a wide variety of magic items you could use instead. Fighters had the greatest restrictions on their magic item use. You could use a magic sword, but that didn’t give you combat options—just superior performance. Clearly, some players enjoy this simplicity. Removing choices removes delay in combat. There’s no room for second-guessing yourself because there’s only one guess. The fighter’s turn is always quick. Unfortunately, fixing this problem requires an extensive and fundamental redesign of the fighter class, akin to 4e’s approach. Including build options like feats works to some degree, but tying combat options to level advancement works best. For example, at 7th level, the fighter might learn the disarm maneuver. This method is more in line with the 1e mentality and removes a foreign character building concept.

Paladin
The paladin came with some steep requirements. You couldn't associate with evil characters or even non-Lawful Good characters for long. So if one of your party members was evil, you had to kill him or leave the party. That created a desperate conflict that many players overlooked anyway. If you didn't, it forced one player or the other to be unhappy. The non-good character wouldn't want to be rounded up and turned over to the authorities, and if the paladin left of his own volition, the player would have to roll up another character or quit playing. How is that fun for anyone?

The answer of course, is that it's not. Player fun was—believe it or not—not the highest priority in the game design. The game was more simulationist, with “realism” being a high priority. Fun came from the player camaraderie and from the situations the characters found themselves in. A class that limits party make-up, however, is a huge disruption. It has to go. Likewise, some players mitigated the other restrictions. You can't own more than 10 magic items, but there's nothing stopping your fighter buddy from hanging onto a bag of holding that you can put your stuff in. Parties tended to spread magic items around pretty evenly, since creating a magic item was so difficult, and the idea of a “magic shop” was almost universally scorned. At best, specific merchants might have one or two specific items that they had acquired, and they were often available above book price anyway. Having more than 10 magic items wasn't a problem until very late in the game.

Ranger
Higher-level rangers got low-level magic-user spells, but they cast them as if they were much lower-level characters. What good is a single magic missile when you’re 9th level? Your magic-user ally could cast 5 of them. Admittedly, the spells were intended to be a light touch—more for flavor than for power. However, class powers that go unused are pointless. The ranger could have a specific selection of spells that enhance what he does best and aren't so level-dependent. Direct-damage spells like magic missile should be strictly off limits. The ranger's spell list needs to be revised accordingly.

It gets worse. Rangers cast magic-user spells. You can't cast magic-user spells while wearing armor. Taking off armor in the middle of combat isn't feasible. Running around without
armor so that you can cast magic missile once is stupid. It's like they didn't even read the rules they wrote.

The ranger had other, silly, differences. Like the monk, the ranger had 2 HD at first level. In the interest of uniformity, that goes. No more than 3 rangers could operate together. Apparently, rangers are very territorial. In any case, an adventuring party made up of more than 3 rangers is going to have serious deficiencies in a lot of circumstances. Like the paladin, the ranger was restricted in terms of wealth to what he could carry on his person. All these things can go.

Thief
The thief was the weakest class overall in 1e. It was virtually worthless in combat, except when its hard-to-use backstab ability came into play. The thief's lower attack bonus meant more misses, which reduced the accelerated damage of the backstab. Any monster that had a reasonable chance to hit the fighter almost automatically hit the thief. Wizards have defensive spells that increase their AC or make them harder to hit in some other way (like mirror image or levitate to remove yourself from the battlefield). Clerics and fighters have armor and hit points. The thief was the weakest defensively and offensively.

Backstab has to come into play more often. Using miniatures allows this if you use rules for facing. You don't have to incorporate the flanking concept from 3e/4e. Remove or reduce the restriction regarding noticing the thief. You might restrict the backstab to only a single attack per target or limit it in some other way. After a person has been hit in the back, he'll watch his back better.

All thieves had the same chance to do their thing. The player had no choice, and the character's game play didn't affect the progression. If you never used your Pick Pockets skill until 17th level, you were just as good at that skill as the thief who used it five times in every game session.

The introduction of a universal skill system provides us with this fix. Everyone has a chance to do certain skills. The thief has a better chance to do certain skills. To give the class some value, the thief should also have one or more exclusive skills.

Magic-User
The magic-user's issues are mostly associated with its spell list. It has no combat ability worth discussing. It has no other features. The magic-user is its spells. Most of the spell-related issues are described elsewhere.

Aside from the effectiveness of its spells, though, are the number and frequency of spells. 3E allowed magic-users to gain bonus spells like clerics. A 1st-level magic-user gets one spell, and then he's done for the day. I know some players relish the challenge of playing a one-trick pony like that, but even with a couple more spells, the 1st-level magic-user is still a delicate creature. The challenge is still there.

Monk
The monk was such an uncomfortable fit for D&D that many DMs didn’t allow it. It also used odd rules, like not adding Strength modifiers to damage rolls, unusual attack rates (like 5 attacks
every 4 rounds), and a motley collection of powers that couldn’t be attributed to any single real-
world inspiration.

However, the archetype of an unarmed combatant is a valid one that has ample precedent in fiction, comics, and movies. I can see a fit for that type of character in the game. Flavor aside, the monk works fairly well there, although the powers could use some consistency with the rest of the game.

For 3e, I changed the monk’s name to “brawler” to make a bare-handed fighter with a much more generic theme. Mechanically, the class needed little revision. It works just as well for 1e. Most of the adaptation was nothing more than name changes. Instead of the Grand Master of Flowers, you become the World Champion of Wrestling.

The monk should also use standard rules. Scaling unarmed damage is fine, but the number of attacks should be more consistent with other characters. If you want to make a flurry of blows type benefit to the class, simply state that the monk attacks twice per round with open hands or monk weapons as a class feature and keep it the same throughout the levels. For scaling the class's combat effectiveness, increase the damage alone.

Bard
The bard was an oddity in a book of exceptions. You had to advance as a fighter to somewhere between 5th and 8th level, then use the dual-class rules to switch to a thief for 5 to 9 levels, and then start druidic training (even though you were really a bard). The bard needs a major overhaul.

The ability score requirements were insane. You needed a 15+ in four stats. You had to be average or better in the other two. Technically, it had to have a 17 Dexterity, although this was not stated in the bard description. It's stated in the rules on dual-classing, which says that you have to have a 17 or 18 in the prime requisites of the class you're taking. Therefore, when switching from fighter to thief, you'd have to have 17+ Dexterity to qualify for it.

The bard concept has been popular all along. Starting with 2nd edition it became part of the core rules. I'd like to include it to replace the thief-like assassin so that players who enjoy playing that type of thing have another option.

The overhaul can start with removing all references to fighter or thief classes. You simply start out as a bard. That removes a ton of problems right there. Keep most of Bard Table I and II intact and merge them together.
Equipment

**The Issue**: Shields
**The Problem**: Shields could only be used against a certain number of attacks, in certain directions, each round. A buckler counted for only a single attack, for example. Again, it adds needless complexity.
**The Fix**: Removing that restriction was one of my first house rules. A shield counts against any number of opponents. What’s the difference, then, between a buckler, small shield and large shield? 3e gave the large shield a larger AC bonus. That works fine for me.

**The Issue**: Pole arm proliferation
**The Problem**: Why so many pole arms? Hafted weapons littered the weapon table, accounting for 19 out of 50 weapons.
**The Fix**: You could fix this a couple of ways, but all of them involve reducing the number of pole arms. For example, you could select a few representative types. Later editions did this. You might instead, however, allow players to mix and match from selected features, combining an axe and spear, for example, or a sword and a tripping hook. The player can call it whatever he wants for flavor. While it might not have the historical support, it seems the best way to allow for Gary’s pole arm fetish while streamlining the price tables and damage tables.

**The Issue**: AC adjustment to attacks
**The Problem**: Every single weapon had a bonus, no change, or a penalty against each different armor type. Thus, your sword might gain a bonus when attacking a person in leather with a shield but suffer a penalty against a person in plate mail. I know of no gamers who used that table.
**The Fix**: Ditch the whole concept.
**Combat**

**The Issue:** Initiative

**The Problem:** On the surface, it was breezy. Each side rolls a d6, highest goes first. However, weapon reach came into play, weapon speed (which never came into play except during initiative ties), and other stuff I don’t remember. Initiative was also done by side by default, rather than by individual. Not your Dexterity, not your level, not your combat experience—nothing counted except for the die that fell out of your friend Bob’s hand. At least the rules allowed for individual initiative, so that’s more of a rules curiosity than inherent bad design.

Actually, it was more complicated than that, but I didn't remember it until I did a rules-as-written game for research for this writing. Actions during a round took place according to an order of play. Firing missiles or casting spells took place before charging into melee. Player choice is secondary.

**Related Issue:** Declaring actions before rolling initiative

**The Problem:** Players losing their action because the situation changed irked me as a DM. I didn’t want my often-new players to feel left out because they announced a *sleep* spell for their declaration and all the low-level bad guys were dead when they got around to casting it. The game had no rules for aborting actions. If your target moved out of line of sight, your spell failed and you lost your action. That's a brutal penalty.

It's also unfriendly game design. Any time you remove an action from a player, you're basically skipping that player's turn. That's less game play for that player.

**The Fix:** Everybody rolls initiative. You choose and execute your action on your initiative. The die type needs to be high enough to keep ties to a minimum. D10 is enough. Add your Dexterity modifier.

**The Issue:** AC going down

**The Problem:** Calculating your AC and your chance to hit was counter-intuitive.

**The Fix:** The 3e system of starting from 10 and going up is exactly what the game needed. It allowed armor and ability scores to have exactly the same effect on the game, but it made all the math easier. It also allows for magic items with obvious bonuses instead of negative bonuses. A +1 shield makes your AC go up, not down. It's more intuitive.

This requires restating the combat tables as attack bonuses, but that's easy enough. It also eliminates about two pages of tables, making the rulebook less intimidating to new players.

**The Issue:** Weapon damage

**The Problem:** Weapons do different damage vs. different sized opponents?

**The Fix:** As a DM who recruited friends often, I found it a barrier to ease of play. I stopped using it early on. I used the chart for medium or smaller sized creatures exclusively. However, before I made the change, I figured the overall average for every weapon in the PH. It was 2-7 for Medium and 2-8 for Large. The most significant variation comes from the two-handed sword. If you want to increase the two-handed sword's damage from 1d10 to 1d12 or 2d6 damage as a concession for that loss, game balance remains intact.
The Issue: Surprise
The Problem: I never understood it as it was presented in the book. I stared at the example chart for hours trying to reconcile it with the description.
The Fix: I used surprise largely at my own discretion when I ran games. When the situation warranted it, DM fiat granted surprise to one side or another. You can ask for checks to see if one side notices the other and use that to set up the encounter, including possibly surprise.

The Issue: Multiple attacks
The Problem: Fighters and other characters with multiple attacks made their attacks at different points in the round. If both sides featured characters with multiple attacks, it often felt like the fighters were taking two turns compared to the other characters. On the other hand, a changing battlefield could leave a fighter with nobody to attack on his turn. It complicates combat unnecessarily and leads to more lost actions.
The Fix: You make your attacks on your initiative.

The Issue: Rate of fire
The Problem: Ranged weapons didn’t follow the same attack rules as melee weapons. Each had a Rate of Fire that determined how many times you could attack with it each round. You could shoot 2 arrows or throw 3 darts per round, for example. Unless you were specialized (an optional rule that came about later), this number never changed with your level.
The Fix: Streamline the combat rules so that melee and ranged attacks use the same mechanics.

The Issue: Glass characters
The Problem: The major combat issue was character frailty. At 1\textsuperscript{st} level, you had a maximum of 18 hp. If you weren’t a fighter or ranger, you had 10 or less. If you were a wizard, you had 6 hp maximum. It’s entirely possible (and not all that unlikely) that a 3\textsuperscript{rd} level wizard might have 3 hp. The unlikely part is that he would live to 3\textsuperscript{rd} level with 1 starting hp.

Certainly monsters have comparable hit points. However, there are endless waves of monsters, and there’s only one of you. There are also hazards that aren’t monsters. Do you know what a 10’ pit does to wizard or thief with 1 hp? It kills him, no save.

This deadliness is part of the charm for some people. Knowing that your character could die at any moment added to the excitement. However, character death should come about due to bad play or making mistakes. It shouldn’t just be random damage out of nowhere.

Also, it increased your attachment to characters who survived to higher levels. A wizard who made it to 10\textsuperscript{th} level had to be lucky and well-played. Luck alone wouldn't carry him that far. That was a character to be proud of.
The Fix: 2e gave characters a buffer by introducing the optional “death's door” rule, wherein characters didn't die at 0; they fell unconscious. To maintain the fast pace of 1e and retain a degree of risk of character death, I'm going to recommend it be even easier to play. You get knocked out at 0 hp and you die from one hit after that. There are no negative hit points or death saves or anything like that. Healing can bring you back into the fight and allow you to keep taking actions.
Now if you take catastrophic damage, this rule can't save you. Jump off a 300' cliff, and you're dead. Stand in lava, and you're dead. Basically, the rule means that monsters stop attacking you and an ally has a chance to come heal you.

The Issue: Grappling, overbearing, and pummeling
The Problem: Table proliferation, lots of exceptions and needless rules. These topics were very complicated, and they were subject to abuse.
The Fix: Simplify them drastically. Make them a standard attack roll. You can have modifiers to the attack based on specific situations (larger or smaller creatures, charging, etc.), but keep them few and simple.

The Issue: Turning undead
The Problem: The collection of effects known as enemy removal or crowd control are very powerful. If encounter balance relies on four enemies threatening the party, removing one of them is a substantial benefit to the party, even if it only lasts for a round or two. During those rounds, the party can concentrate fire on a smaller number of enemies, enemy synergies don’t work, the PCs have greater control over the battlefield, and the removed enemies aren’t attacking the PCs.

The cleric’s ability to turn undead is a potent enemy removal effect that can remove many enemies from the battlefield entirely. At higher levels it allows the cleric to simply turn the enemies to dust. It’s too much.
(Undead are troublesome in general in this way. They are wholly immune to certain classes of spells and wholly susceptible to attacks like this. I’d prefer it if they were somewhere in between this extreme and the 4e extreme where they’re just like any other creature).

The Fix: What if you replaced the removal aspect of undead with a simple damaging effect? Clerics could retain a big, showy effect, giving them a noteworthy effect on the combat. Make it powerful enough that turning undead is still a viable option in any encounter, but not so much that it automatically destroys or removes undead high enough in level to threaten the cleric.
Keep the table substantially the same (with undead identified by HD rather than a specific name), but on a Turn effect, the cleric inflicts damage to the affected undead. On a Destroyed effect, inflict a larger amount of damage.

For evil clerics, a Turn effect allows the cleric to move the target up to its speed and make an attack. On a Destroyed effect, the cleric can move the target, attack twice, and has the option to destroy the undead at the end of this action.

The Issue: Level drain
The Problem: Level drain was a horribly destructive power. Many players would rather have their character killed than level drained. It was easier to undo. A level drain could undo months of game play. Of course--this being first edition--there was no save.
The Fix: Permanent damage to a character should be extremely rare. The combat effect can be mimicked by assigning a character combat penalties, like a reduction in attack effectiveness, damage, and spell selection. The character might take extra damage from future attacks, take psychic damage, or be affected by a curse.

The long-term effects need either a remedy or removal from the game.
Monsters

The Issue: Wandering monsters
The Problem: I never liked the random determination of a number of monsters or whether or not the creature was in its lair. So many creatures were considered “Very Rare” that you only had a fraction of a percentage chance to ever encounter them randomly. However, you had a 100% chance to meet them if the DM wanted you to. There was only one “monster” identified as Common—orcs. According to the MM as written, a good chunk of your encounters you meet during your character’s lifespan be with orcs.
The Fix: If you want to include a monster to establish the flavor of the local setting, do it. Don’t rely on a random die roll. If characters are in a jungle, they should encounter a great cat. There's no rolling.

The Issue: Monster stat blocks
The Problem: A good chunk of a monster’s stat block was meaningless.
The Fix: Remove the % in lair category, Frequency, and other pointless headings.

The Issue: Save-or-die powers
The Problem: A single die roll that kills off a character or even an entire party can be an abrupt and random end to a game. It sucks knowing that no matter how well you build, equip or play your character, a surprise encounter with a catoblepas can wipe your group.
The Fix: Save-or-die powers should be dialed back in general or require some kind of setup so that players have a chance to react. Characters should also have reasonable access to defenses against these attacks: magic items or spells that increase their chance of success or allow them to avoid the attack.
Spellcasting

The Issue: Rolling to learn spells
The Problem: You had a chance to not learn *sleep*, the uber-spell at 1st level. You also had a maximum number of spells you could learn. That wasn’t so bad by itself, but you couldn’t forget spells. If you failed to learn the cool spells at 1st level and filled your list up with crap like *jump* and *friends*, then you had a hard time learning *sleep*, *charm person*, and *magic missile*. In short, you could be hosed during character creation.

The Fix: Create a fixed number of spells that characters automatically learn at each level. Clerics automatically gain all spells available to them, and they can wear plate, too, so I don’t see any brokenness here. Make the number large enough so that players can choose a variety of offensive, defensive and utilitarian spells and make them chase down the rest through roleplaying or later advancement. I’d suggest 6 or more.

The Issue: Spell recovery times by spell level
The Problem: Hidden somewhere in the DMG was a table showing how long you had to rest before you could re-memorize spells based on the highest-level spell you cast during your active time. It was needless complication.

Related Issue: Spell Preparation Time
The Problem: Spells required 15 minutes per spell level to memorize or pray for. You had to total up all of your spell levels and calculate how much time you had to spend. So a 16th-level magic-user, with 5 1st-level spells, 5 2nd-level spells, 5 3rd-level spells, 5 4th-level spells, 5 5th-level spells, 3 6th-level spells, 2 7th-level spells, and 1 8th level spell had to spend 28 hours and 45 minutes resting before he could prepare spells again.

The Fix: Ditch the whole concept. Standardize the recharge time. Standardize the preparation time.

The Issue: Power variance within a spell level
The Problem: Spells of the same level were often highly variable in power and desirability. In fact, some spells were “worth” more than other spells several levels higher.

I often argued that *fireball* should have been 5th level. Its massive area of effect, its extraordinary range, its ability to do damage even on a save, and its destructive potential overall (not to mention the visual attraction) made it a popular spell. The jump in power from a 4th level wizard to a 5th level wizard was monstrous. *Fireball* clearly outclassed other 3rd level spells and even core 4th level spells (Unearthed Arcana added some good 4th level spells that made the comparison more difficult, but that was 7 years later). However, 5th level had *cone of cold*, which was comparable to *fireball*, even if it came up a little short in the comparison. The cone shape of *cone of cold* was harder to use in combat. You could fling a fireball over the head of your companions, while *cone of cold* required you to have direct line of effect to the bad guys—which meant that they could reach you, too.

*Fireball*’s trait of expanding on impact was presented as a liability, but once players found out about it—either by having one blow up in face or by reading the rulebook—they quickly discovered how 10’ high passages could make their *fireball*’s explosive area expand far beyond its stated dimensions and blow up even more orcs.
My litmus test for spell balance hinges on spell selection, both by players and NPCs. If players reach 5th level and always take the same spell for their first 3rd-level choice, that spell deserves close analysis. Likewise, if they reach 15th and there are spells that they've never chosen for their 3rd-level list, those spells need to be adjudicated for their worth in the game. I don’t expect that you’ll ever attain equal parity between all spells, but if you have the degree of value spread that exists in 1e, what you end up with is every magic-user having very similar spell list, deviating only by that cursed chance to learn spells. The spellcaster’s alleged versatility was hampered by this power imbalance. You might have read magic, jump, and hold portal in your book, but you always memorized sleep, charm person or magic missile.

Specific spells had unintentional potential for abuse. Levitate, for example could be cast on an enemy. The spellcaster could then move the enemy upward 20'/round for a total of 60 rounds. Once the character was at the maximum height, and any other enemies dealt with, the magic-user could choose to end the spell or let it expire on its own. The target took 20d6 points of falling damage with no save.

Meanwhile, the levitating foe suffered climbing penalties if he tried to attack the spellcaster with ranged weapons. Melee was out of the question because of range. The magic-user was free to seek cover from these ranged attacks, too. If the target did succeed in killing the magic-user, he doomed himself. Once the spell expired, he fell to his death!

No 2nd level spell should be such a certain autokill on a failed saving throw. Sure, it requires the combat to take place either outdoors or in certain very large underground caverns, but those are fairly common circumstances. Those aren’t conditions that are restrictive enough to justify a potentially deadly 2nd-level spell.

The Fix: The fix is, again, tied to a long list of specifics. Essentially, you have to rewrite the spell lists, addressing each individual problem. That's an enormous task, and it's going to change the game. In fact, it might change the game too much. Players have been used to this power discrepancy all along; 4th edition drastically brought the spells into line, but at the expense of flavor, and players reacted poorly. It has to be a delicate touch.

The Issue: Spell disruption
The Problem: If a wizard was hit in a round before he had a chance to act, he lost whatever spell he was planning to cast. That's right—you could lose a spell you hadn't yet begun to cast.

The Fix: Ditch the whole concept

The Issue: Aging from spellcasting
The Problem: Certain spells came with a cost. Some had throwaway material components. Some required an expensive focus you could use over and over. Some took away a fraction of your life force by aging you anywhere from 1 to 5 years. That's a horrific cost, and it imposes extra record-keeping for no other purpose.

The Fix: The only real cost for spells should be a more valuable component, measured in gold pieces.
General

The Issue: Miniatures
The Problem: The game’s details encouraged miniatures use, but the rules didn’t support miniatures. For example, a shield only counts against the front or the left flank. How did you determine where an opponent was? Could a player just say “I attack the centaur from his right flank”? What difference does a character’s speed matter if you’re going to abstract combat to that degree?

The rules, including distances, ranges, speed, etc. should all accommodate miniatures use. Players not using minis can still use the rules without modification. Allowing for both in the rules design requires the writing of clear rules.

The Fix: Include rules for miniatures play in the appropriate combat and movement sections. Players not using miniatures can ignore this small concession to miniatures play.

The Issue: XP for gold?
The Problem: If you didn’t play 1e, you’re not going to want to believe this one. You’re going to swear I misread something and I just played it wrong so long I’m certain that it was in the book somewhere. You got experience points for collecting treasure on a 1xp: 1 gp basis. Loot 1d6 x 1000 gold from a giant’s bag and you got 1d6 x 1000 xp. I swear it’s true.

DM largesse or stinginess could warp character advancement. The whole rule concept created huge potential problems. What about an inheritance? An old Dungeon Magazine adventure titled The Inheritance that started with a PC inheriting a small keep. According to 1e rules, that character gains a level automatically. From reading a will. There was a mention that the DM could modify awards like that, but the rules allowed that sort of nonsense if the DM didn't specifically address it. That's a problem.

Players didn’t want to fight slimes and rats because of this reason. They wanted to rob and murder wealthy NPCs. The game rule encouraged brigandage and piracy rather than the role-play of selfless heroes.

Probate issues aside, characters could receive more experience points by negotiating for rewards, fraud (selling stuff that isn’t theirs, for example), and other things, most of them illegal.

The idea of experience points is a quantification of learning. Characters grow wealthier by gaining money, not wiser. The value of the money is reward enough; tying an experience point bonus to it overvalues it.

The Fix: Ditch the whole concept. Characters gain experience points by overcoming challenges in the game. Obviously, monster XP rewards need to increase to make up the difference, but not by much. Monsters like kobolds carried copper pieces for a fraction of a single xp bonus. Their leader could carry five times his xp value in loot, though. It made for a huge disparity that monster-based xp rewards evens out greatly.

The Issue: Psionics
The Problem: I don’t think I’ve ever seen a game mechanic that has “afterthought” written on it quite so clearly. Ignoring the specific powers for a moment, psionics attacks were epically powerful. Reading through the effects reveals just how destructive psionic attacks were against non-psionics or against a psionic character whose psionic defense points had been depleted. One
code indicated that the target was stunned. Another removed a psionic power from the target permanently. Yes, a benefit on your character sheet could be crossed out. Yet another left the target catatonic. Another code was “R”, which stood for Robot: you could gain total control over your enemy for 2-8 weeks! This being 1st edition, it was possible to kill the target outright.

Psionic combat was a Rocky-style slugfest between giants.

It was also fast, taking place in its entirety before regular combat started. Psionic combat took place in the blink of an eye. The psionic character could spend an hour of real time while his companions went into the other room and watched TV.

It also had little cost. According to the Players Handbook, having psionics meant that you might be attacked by psionic creatures like the thought eater. However, that just meant that you got extra experience points. It had NO cost in gold, experience points, reduction of class power, or anything. One random die roll during character generation meant that your character was vastly more powerful than the character of your buddy across the table.

The Fix: Save psionics for a supplement. Modify them heavily, at least to the extent of 2nd edition’s psionicist class. Psionic actions should take the place of a regular melee attack or spell.

The Issue: Arbitrary deadliness

The Problem: PCs had a growing scale of deadliness in their powers. Low-level spells could incapacitate weak enemies (sleep, ray of enfeeblement, etc.), medium-level spells had a chance to kill enemies, but it was rare (phantasmal killer), higher-level spells had a save-or-die effect, with limitations (disintegrate or finger of death), and only one or two of the very highest-level spells had enemy-removal without a save (temporal stasis, power word: kill). Even these had limitations—a range of touch, or a certain number of hit points. Finally, monsters also had magic resistance, an extra chance to resist the PCs’ spells.

Monsters, on the other hand, had save-or-die effects even at very low levels. The giant centipede’s poison was so “weak” that it allowed a +4 on the save. But it still killed PCs if they failed. A 1st-level cleric, with a base saving throw of 10, saved on a 6+. That leaves a 25% chance of instant death from an attack by one of the weakest monsters in the game. By 4th level, PCs fought medusas—a monster with an ongoing area-of-effect save or die power. The monster’s tactics also favored surprise. It’s entirely feasible for a party’s first encounter with a medusa to be over before they even rolled initiative. Characters have an average save vs. petrification by this level of 13. Thus, a group of 4 characters has about a 2.5% chance of being turned to stone en masse in the first round and a very good chance that at least one of them would be petrified.

One of the potentially deadliest monsters in the game was the water weird. Once it hit you, it was going to drown you quickly. Only one single spell in the game could destroy the weird permanently, and almost nobody carried that spell on a regular basis. It might have been on a scroll somewhere, but it was almost certain that nobody had it on their list of ready spells (unless they had met water weirds in the past). Monsters that killed you automatically within several rounds were common—green slimes and mind flayers fell in that category, too. You don’t even get a save.

The Fix: There are a couple of ways to fix this. 4e has taken one route—reduce the effectiveness of the monsters’ powers in various ways. The 4e medusa stones her enemies in stages. This route is probably best from a game balance standpoint. The cost of this balance is flavor. The medusa from 4e is just another monster. It lacks the absolute pants-wetting terror of a 1e medusa.
Another route is to raise the level of the monster associated with the insta-kill effect. Medusae and banshees, each with an area affect death sentence, should be very high in level.

**Related Issue:** Pass/fail defenses

**The Problem:** Monsters also had resistances that nerfed party combat effectiveness. Some monsters needed a +1 or better weapon to hit them. A 17th level fighter with a girdle of storm giant strength was less useful to the party than a wizard’s +1 dagger when it came to fighting a peryton. The effect was binary—you either had it or you didn’t. There were ways around it, like with spells. In fact, I even wrote an article offering player advice on how to fight such monsters—drop them from a height, immobilize and bypass, attack with fire, drown them, etc. Despite the optimistic tone of my article, the game design element is still awful. Players never had such an advantage over the monsters. Even if they somehow gained this monstrous defense, it didn’t matter. Monsters had a built-in ability to attack other creatures with a similar resistance or to overcome it by virtue of their hit dice.

**The Fix:** The fix is tied to other issues. Remove the distinction between monster level and character level. Hit dice = level. This allows characters to fight these monsters fairly. Characters without a magic item are already suffering from poor attacks anyway.

**The Issue:** Magic item creation

**The Problem:** The rules for magic item creation were such that characters rarely made permanent magic items. Using the spell Permanency could cost the character a point of Constitution, so most PC item creation was limited to scrolls, potions, etc. If you’re going to make an item that costs you a point of Constitution, why make a +1 dagger? You had to be high level to make any items, you had to seek out a specific recipe for each item, you had to find specific components for the item as decided by the DM, you had to spend money, you had to spend sometimes weeks or months in uninterrupted labor, and you still had a substantial chance of failure. To make an item worthy of sacrificing a point of Constitution, you had to rack up a very high chance of failure. The difficulty of making magic items makes the combat against mundane weapon-resistant monsters even more frustrating. It would be one thing if monsters of level, say, 4-7 all needed a +1 weapon to hit if each party could make its own items at will. But magic item possession was largely a matter of random chance or DM generosity. If the DM wanted you to encounter those monsters but never remembered to give you the right magic items or had deliberately destroyed them with a rust monster, you were in trouble.

**The Fix:** Standardize magic item creation rules.

**The Issue:** Monsters with + hp

**The Problem:** On the surface, it’s not a problem. Some monsters have bonus hit points. Not a big deal. However, for each +3 hit points (like the troll’s 6+6 HD), the monster was counted as a monster with +1 HD. Thus, the troll attacked and saved as an 8 HD monster.

**The Fix:** It’s counter-intuitive and irksome. I’m okay with certain monsters having a bonus to hit points in their text or stat block, but if the monster’s going to be treated in all ways as an 8 HD monster, it should be an 8 HD monster. The hit point difference between a 6+6 HD troll and an 8 HD troll is 3 points. Fine. Trolls have 8 HD now.
Book Design & Layout

The Issue: Editing and Organization

The Problem: The writing in the core books was cumbersome. I'm not going to claim to be as evocative a writer as Gary, but I can say with some authority that having another editor prepare his work would have made the text flow much better.

Likewise, topics rambled. Read the table of contents in the DMG. First, you'll notice that there aren't any cohesive chapters. It has topics, but they go from secondary skills, to starting level, to age and aging, to disease and parasitic infections to a fairly lucid section on character basics (ability scores, class features, etc).

Much of the DMG expanded on PH material, including augmented discussion of ability scores, alignment, and spells. That material should be included in the PH. A player casting a summoning spell should know what type of creature he might summon.

A lot of the material could have been cut entirely or at least deferred to later book themed around them. Did the game ever need more than a page of its core rules devoted to parasitic infections? I don't think so.

Gary's caps lock got stuck often, too, especially in the DMG. He must have shouted himself hoarse typing these books.

Finally, use a serif font for text. Sans serif is fine for headings and titles, but the reason that books use serifs for text is the same now as it was then: readability.

The Fix: Edit the books.

The Issue: Dice ranges

The Problem: This falls under the broader category about editing the books. In 1e, random variations were almost always presented with the ranges, and not with the method of calculating them. For the mathematically adept, it didn't often matter; you could figure it out. But there were circumstances where it wasn't obvious. Is 3-12 3d4 or 1d10+2?

The Fix: Write out the formula, not the results.

The Issue: Rules Everywhere

The Problem: I mentioned the scattered description of universal skills, but it wasn't just skills. It was everything. A lot of material that players need was in the Dungeon Masters Guide. Hidden away in that secret tome were the specifics of combat, additional information regarding several pages' worth of spells, chances for non-thieves to climb walls, character information like age, height and weight, and lots more—none of these things should be secret.

Part of this problem was the growing, organic nature of the game. It was still developing even as Gary was writing the rules down. I get that. No grudges.

The Fix: Rules for player characters should be in the player's book. This includes all of the spell information, combat information, character creation methods, secondary skills/proficiencies, height/weight/age, etc.

The Issue: Optional Rules

The Problem: 1e didn’t have this problem as much as 2e did, but things like non-weapon proficiencies (NWP) introduced it. Players should know that, regardless of who’s running, they can use the material from the core book (PH) with a high degree of certainty.
The Fix: Core rules should be in a core rulebook. Optional rules should be in supplemental books. The core book is then considered the canon from which individual campaigns might vary.

Miscellaneous

The Issue: Universal Skills

The Problem: Until the idea of non-weapon proficiencies came along (a cumbersome name if there ever was), characters had no rules for developing non-combat-related skills. Likewise, many NWPs had clear and decisive combat uses, which made the name even more ridiculous. Also, NWPs were a weak fix. It cost one selection to gain a skill, and another to improve it by a single point. Improving your chance of using a skill was never worthwhile compared to the benefit gained by selecting another skill.

Nobody but a thief has a chance of hearing something on the other side of a door? What if my cleric needs to scamper over a wall to get out of a town under quarantine for the plague? I did a Dragon Magazine article on this subject at the tail end of 2nd edition, and the hours of rules collection I had to do indicate how clear and pervasive this problem still was even at that stage of the game's growth.

The Fix: I'm developing a system of universal skills like listening, climbing, etc. While there are a lot of ways to approach it, I'm going with a percentile system, following the precedent of the thief's table. It's not my first choice, but I think it retains the 1e flavor better than other systems.

Likewise, I'm fine with the idea of customizing characters to some degree with NWPs, or feats as later editions would call them. For my 1e revision, we can just call them Proficiencies.

The Issue: Dungeon Level

The Problem: Each floor of a dungeon presented increasing difficulty. If you went downstairs, the monsters were automatically more powerful. This concept became more general over time until it referred to a difficulty of monsters. Level 4 monsters were all supposed to be about the same power. It was, like 3rd edition's CR, a way of categorizing monsters by the threat they posed to the player characters.

The Fix: The idea is sound, but using the word “level” for everything is confusing. You can use “Threat Rating” or anything else that's more accurately descriptive.

The Issue: Player strongholds

The Problem: Some players like the possibility of creating a base of operations, with followers and soldiers and serfs, and all that. Some don't. I don't have any problem with the concept of higher-level characters building a stronghold. However, the topic is very large, as you can see by the rules devoted to this topic in the DMG. I don't feel that it should be in the core player's book.

The Fix: Move the rules elsewhere, either in the DMG or another supplement focusing solely on building and maintaining strongholds and the benefits they provide.
Bits and Pieces

These issues are less destructive to game play, but they are flawed nonetheless. While we're fixing the more important issues, it doesn't hurt to address these.

The Issue: Racial Preference Table  
The Problem: The PH included a table cross-referencing the races and including notes on how they felt about each other. Some races didn't reciprocate good or ill feelings. It was totally meaningless, except as flavor.  
The Fix: Pitch it.

The Issue: Bend bars/lift gates  
The Problem: That’s actually a heading? How about “lift boulder” or “pull train”? What are my chances of that?  
The Fix: Why not abstract the mechanic’s name so that it’s a “heroic effort” or something? Done.

The Issue: Subclasses  
The Problem: Some classes were considered sub-classes of other classes. This was somewhat useful for applying certain benefits to the entire group, but there were always exceptions, so it wasn't universal. However, since we're ditching the assassin and the illusionist both for being too similar to their respective classes, the sub-class classification loses a lot of meaning. Also, it's easy to clarify in text when you mean clerics and when you mean “clerics but not druids”. For example, you could just write “clerics”.  
The Fix: Ditch the whole concept.

The Issue: Weight given in coins  
The Problem: Weight of objects was counted in coins, not pounds. It was supposed to be an abstraction of actual weight and physical encumbrance, but few (if any) items had coin weights that were any different than their actual weight. Also, the alleged weight of coins was way off. I'm surprised early gamers, with a much stronger background in history, let Gary get away with that (Roman coins, for example, weighed as little as 96 per pound. Somewhere around 60 was more common. Coins that weigh 10/pound are huge).  
The Fix: Calculate weight in pounds.

The Issue: Distances in inches  
The Problem: The game did not assume the use of miniatures, but measurements were given in terms of inches, reflecting the game's origin in miniatures play. One inch was 10 feet, except outdoors, where it was 10 yards. That's right, spells and weapon ranges changed depending on how much space there was above you. It makes some sense for the longest-ranged missiles—bows and crossbows—but it makes less sense for spells and spears. Fireballs don't arc. Besides, indoor encounter distance was likely to be far more limited by walls and doors than by the physical capabilities of the weapon in question. Larger rooms almost always have ceilings to scale, too.
The Fix: Measure ranges in consistent units, and make those units consistent with your miniatures scale. Either measure ranges in 5' increments or use squares.

The Issue: The Turn
The Problem: This one's minor, but it matters. The round was the combat round, which was a minute. A turn was 10 minutes. However, the rules often clarified how long multiple turns were parenthetically, like so:

“Underground the ranger must have observed the creature to be tracked within 3 turns (30 minutes) of the commencement of tracking, and the ranger must begin tracking at a place where the creature was observed”

If it's 30 minutes, and you're going to clarify that it's 30 minutes after you use your special term for 30 minutes anyway, go ahead and say “30 minutes.” We know how long that is. Again—this wasn't a big deal, but I often taught new players how to play, and it was just another minor barrier that made the game seem incomprehensible.

Also, people tend to use “turn” like in a board game. When your initiative comes up, the DM says “it's your turn”, which makes it seem like a turn is a single action or a short series of actions. The game already has some confusion over its use of common words (like level); it doesn't need more.

The Issue: 1.5 Edition
The Problem: Unearthed Arcana was like a second Players Handbook, offering new races, classes, spells, etc. It introduced the concept of “power inflation” to the game, with very potent races (the drow and the svirfneblin) and classes (barbarian and cavalier).

The Fix: I'm not even going to touch that one right now. Ideally, I'd merge that material into a single manuscript.

The Issue: Alignment Languages
The Problem: The idea that all people who share a common alignment can talk to each other in a secret language is—sorry, Gary—ludicrous. For all the talk of “realism” tossed around in those days, the whole idea of a common language developing the same among people who never interacted with each other is entirely implausible.

Worse still, if you changed alignment you forgot your old language somehow. While you might assume that the character learned his new alignment language, the rules didn't say that. The whole mess was silly.

The Fix: Bye, bye, alignment languages!
Summary

This list of complaints is fairly lengthy. I imagine some people will draw the conclusion that I didn’t enjoy playing 1st edition D&D. That wouldn’t be true. For one thing, there weren’t a lot of comparisons around. Back in the day, we didn’t notice all of these things as problems. In fact, as players, we had a great deal of fun in trying to use the “broken” elements of the game to our advantage. As DMs, we tried to find creative ways to counter them within the framework of the rules. It's like watching the original Star Trek series—it was so exciting and well-written that the internal inconsistencies were just another part of the entertainment.

Also, we fixed a lot of these things on the fly. TSR (and later WotC) discovered these changes and implemented many of them into new editions, based on how many people were already doing it and their own research into game play.

However, as we learned more about role-playing in general and saw how other people or other games approached certain things, the design flaws became more irritating. The game needed an overhaul in a larger way than Sage Advice and the occasional errata could fix. It needed a revision substantial enough to be called a new edition.

Re-reading through my work, I notice that many of these changes did make their way into third edition. Apparently, I'm not the only one who had these thoughts. When WotC changed the game further and 4e came out, players abandoned it in droves. Pathfinder is outselling D&D, and D&D has never not been the role-playing game leader until that happened.

What would I like to do about it? I'd love to scan the PH, make the rules changes I see fit, amend the rest of text as little as possible to accommodate it, and make it a PDF. I'd gut the DMG of a whole lot of fluff. You know that table for how many cubic feet of rock per 8-hour shift you can mine by race? Not really critical to Dungeon Mastering. Conversion to and from Gamma World or Boot Hill? Nope, don't need it. The monster summary that is Appendix E? Gone. All the rules for class powers and spells need to be in the PH, while lycanthropy belongs in the Monster Manual.

I'm sure many people will disagree with one or more issues and assertions I've stated. That's fine. It's a game. It's all subjective. One person's treasure is another person's trash.