

# Enlightened Grogard

en·light·ened (adjective) having gained a deeper spiritual insight

grog·nard (noun) someone who stubbornly rejects a contemporary approach

## Introduction

Remember those advertisements in the back of comic books? "100 soldiers for \$1.25!" "Personalized pencils!" "Sea monkeys! Real live fun pet." As a kid I was entranced by these ads. I'd send in my money, wait the 4-6 weeks and then get...exactly what I was promised and not what I expected. The ad never said that the soldiers were 1 centimeter high or that the sea monkeys did not really look like tiny aquatic humanoids.

I quickly got wise to these types of ads. Before I'd send in my money, I'd scour the ad for any clue about what might be wrong. Sometimes I'd figure it out but, often, I still couldn't glean why the deal was too good to be true because my imagination was just too good at fooling me into seeing things as I wanted to see them.

Strangely, I think the development team at Wizards of the Coast(tm) may have fallen into a similar trap with 4e. They, even more so than I, could see the flaws in D&D and were keen to fix them. We know now that they conducted studies and interviewed players about the game. They then spent, literally, years carefully constructing a brand new game system that fixed everything that was un-fun about D&D 3.5. It was an herculean task and they did it with obvious skill.

Alas, in the end, the players ended up with...exactly what they were promised and not what they expected. My D&D 3.5 house rules document was 17 pages long and as I paged through my shiny new D&D 4e core rulebooks I saw that every single complaint I had about d20 had been addressed in 4e. "How could I not love this game?" I asked myself.

But once I began to play, I began to be disappointed. What was implied by 4e's promise is that it would continue to capture the excitement and engagement of the original game. But somehow that "WOW!" that I first felt 25 years ago has been severely diluted by the new ruleset.

How this happened is very difficult to put your finger on. If you talk to the "h4ters" you'll hear a variety of explanations: "It's too much like a video game." "It's too simple." "It doesn't feel 'real' enough." "All the characters are the same." "It's not the same without Vancian magic."

As a new 4e player, I heard these criticisms and understood them but didn't fully agree with any of them. So, for a year, I gave D&D 4th Edition everything I had. I believed that I was just being a grognard and that I would grow to love the new edition more than the old one. I logged over 100 hours as both a player and a DM. By the time a year had passed I was completely demoralized. The fun was simply not there anymore.

At that time, a good friend of mine asked me to play in an Iron Heroes game. (If you're unfamiliar with it, Iron Heroes is a popular d20 system for low-magic fantasy play.) I was really reluctant to return to

anything d20 at that point but my friend is persuasive and also one of the best DMs I've ever played with. So I agreed. The very night that I sat down to create my PC the \*\*\*\*FUN\*\*\*\* came roaring back. Suddenly I remembered what I loved about the game. Suddenly, I was so anxious to play I could not stop thinking about the next session.

It was at that time that I received an insight onto what might have gone wrong with D&D 4th edition. D&D is about being immersed in creativity. And if you think about people who do nothing but create for a living (like artists, actors, musicians, etc.) they thrive on having an infinite field of possibilities to draw from. Even the fundamental elements (like an actor's stage or an artist's canvas) are flexible mediums whose boundaries can be stretched or even broken to make an artistic piece engaging.

The rules in 4e simply do not stretch the way that many players want them to. In d20, you wove your character concept, adventure, monsters and other ideas into a very flexible rules framework. In 4e, the rules force you to modify your idea to fit into a finite "canvas" that discourages customization. As a result, the players' focus is drawn to the rules and they forget to immerse themselves in the creation of a story. I believe THAT is the reason that I don't enjoy playing 4e as much as I thought I would.

Now that I have finally arrived at this insight, I am more disappointed than relieved. I still have a terrible problem: I'm not really happy with D&D 3.5 either. It stifles my game in a different way: long combats, lack of scalability and too much focus on individual PCs rather than party teamwork. In my frustration I've looked at some other d20 rules systems. The problem with each of these is that they don't go far enough. They fix the symptoms but they aren't fixing the fundamental ailments.

It's my belief that there is a middle ground out there. You can have a good portion of the balance and simplicity of 4e without sacrificing the richly complex and permissive canvas that D&D 3.5 provides. Alas, it's not available to buy (not even if I wait 4-6 weeks for delivery).

So, here I am getting ready to roll my own. I am not a professional games developer and I know that I can't stand up to the sheer experience and creative power of people who design games for a living. But I'm not entirely an upstart. I have been playing D&D for a long time and I have logged a lot of hours at the table. After all, my D&D 3.5 player's handbook is held together with duct tape. I've played D&D with 100's of different people. I've written modules that have been published in RPGA campaigns. I know what fun is when I see it.

So, for my sake and yours, I'm creating the Enlightened Grogard rule system in an attempt to bring the best of everything together. Let's hope it'll do until the pros step in with 5th edition.

Andrew M. Nuxoll  
September 2009

## **Reading the Rules**

If you've played D&D before, Enlightened Grogard is going to look very familiar to you. If you're reading this document with an aim to find out whether it's a system you'd like to try you should probably start with the Approach section (below). In addition, I've added a section to the top of each chapter titled "changes from the core rules." You should be able to review this section and then skip to the parts you'd like to know more about. By doing so, an experienced player can get a big picture understanding of Enlightened Grogard in less than an hour.

If you've never played D&D before you should be sure to dive into Enlightened Grogard with a an experienced player to help you. E.G. is fairly simple compared to many other role playing games. But all roleplaying game systems are complex, including this one.

## Approach

Here is a summary of the core aspects of my approach to the Enlightened Grogard system.

1. **More focus on the game, less focus on the rules.** When designing a role-playing game, one of the fundamental conflicts is between realism and ease of play. Experienced roleplayers are all too familiar with scenarios like this one:

*Player:* I rolled a 12 with +7 that makes a 19.

*DM:* As you swing your axe at the beast it ...

*Player:* Wait! I forgot about my amulet. It's actually a 21.

*DM:* In that case, ..

*Player:* Oh, wait! Are we in an "outdoor environment?" I get a bonus for that.

*DM:* I guess so.

*Player:* Oh then I really rolled a ...

*DM:* Wait, did you remember to roll your miss chance?

*Other Players:* \*collective groan\*

My solution is to keep the complexity in character design but opt for simpler rules when dealing with events that occur during a play session. Major steps I've taken to accomplish this are:

- A token system is used to turn temporary modifiers to attacks, defenses, saving throws and skills into a currency that is readily visible to all and can be hoarded, shared or spent as the players desire. Thus, the problem is addressed while simultaneously adding a compelling tactical layer to combat encounters. As a result, every player at the table is engaged in the combat all the time rather than stacking dice or sending text messages while they wait for their next turn.
  - If you have to pause your primary action to make an auxiliary check or resolve some contingent effect, then it's likely you're diluting the excitement. Common culprits include: spell resistance checks, concentration checks, calculating spell ranges, miss chances, spell durations and figuring out just where to place a complex-shaped area-of-effect. I've taken many steps to repair or eliminate distractions like this that add only a little realism to the game at too great a cost.
  - Complex actions like grapple and overrun that require one or more players to stop and look up the procedure in a rulebook make everyone lose focus. While such actions can't be eliminated without over-simplifying the game, I've observed that a modest effort to simplify them and make them consistent helps a lot.
2. **Engaging, fast-paced combat.** A frequent complaint is that high level combat takes too long and, worse, each player has to wait too long for her next turn. Just making a combat turn

shorter is not sufficient if it leads to “grind” where combat rounds go quickly but aren't tactically interesting. My approach is to keep the combat system mostly intact, but look for ways to carefully limit the number of actions you can take in a round and also limit the number of dice rolls associated with any given action. I also look for ways to keep the tactical situation in constant flux so that it's never repetitive or boring. As a result, a single turn in EG goes much faster but is still varied and interesting. Some of the major changes that I made to speed up combat include:

- Remove rules that allow many attacks with a single action. You won't find full round attacks in Enlightened Grogard.
- I've introduced a clever mechanic for area-of-effect attacks that avoids making a separate roll for every target of the attack.
- I've streamlined rules for cohorts, animal companions and other non-PCs. These rules used to make one player's turn take forever.
- One of the biggest reasons for the slowdown in high level combat is the huge number of free-action and no-action benefits that each player has access to on every turn. Everything from activating those boots of speed to entering a barbarian rage takes a little bit of time to adjudicate. At high level those seconds really start to add up. In contrast, very few benefits come automatically or as a free action in E.G. Instead, every benefit you get or effect you might create costs an action. This even includes benefits like an attack bonus for flanking or an AC bonus for taking cover. In addition to a dramatic speed up in high level combats, this change creates an economy of actions. Players must make difficult, tactically important choices about what to use their actions for each round.

3. **Character design that is both flexible and balanced.** Given the sheer number of rules that have been added to the game and the wonderfully rich multiclassing system that's in place, some unbalanced character builds have inevitably arisen. My approach to this is has these core elements:

- I've taken the obvious step of altering or removing overpowered rules items.
- I've adjusted the design of character classes so that so that you can't “cherry pick” powerful abilities via multiclassing.
- I've smoothed the rate of bonuses to the base attack bonus and saving throws (now called defenses) so you can't inflate a character's statistics by taking a level in another class.
- I've greatly expanded the feat system so that characters aren't handcuffed to a particular subset of must-have feats. Not only do characters have many more feats, but I've added many many feats to the game that are designed to make both combat and non-combat encounters richer and full of tactical intrigue. Many feats from non-core rules sources are still compatible too. For example, with this system a fighter can be a noble fencer, a brutal street thug, a polearm specialist, a spinning knife hurler, an armored knight, a gladiator, an acrobatic dodger, a deadeye archer, a tactician, a whirling dervish, or one of

the myriad combinations of those.

4. **Eliminate the “15 minutes workday.”** With E.G., adventurers no longer have a strong incentive to stop and rest after every combat. I've accomplished this with two fundamental changes. First, the frequency with which spells, magic items and feats can be used is rarely limited to once per day. Some are always on, other reset every encounter and some can be used an unlimited number of times. Second, the damage and healing mechanics in E.G. are subtly but significantly different. Hit point recovery is quick and does not require magic or long-term rest. Actual physical injury occurs when hit point damage is severe. The result, is that PCs recover quickly from individual combats but still need rest eventually.
5. **Reevaluate spells.** Several spells and spell mechanics have been improved:
  - Spells that allow the caster to fight better than a fighter or find traps better than a rogue ruin the fun for the players. I've identified and repaired spells like this.
  - Some divination spells allow the caster to ruin a good plot. Simultaneously, taking divination away from the players spoils the opportunity for some exciting revelations. My solution is to remove or adjust the oft-abused divinations but keep the others intact.
  - The fact that spell levels do not line up with character levels is confusing to new players and even some old players too. I've done the obvious and created 18 spell levels instead of 9.
  - Spells that provide a long term improvement in character ability (often called "buff" spells) cause too much frustration everyone as the players constantly try to meta-game when the next combat will be so they can be prepared in advance. I've changed the rules so this is both impossible and unnecessary.
  - Polymorph. If you can be any monster, why not be the most overpowered beast in the book?
  - I've adjusted the power level of many spells to bring the power level of a spellcasting character in line with martial characters.
6. **Oh, Christmas Tree!** Everyone loves the mystery and excitement of finding items imbued with magical power. However, a problem arises when a character can't get along without them. In too many cases, I've seen a player happy to sacrifice his PC's life in order to save his PC's magical gear. I've addressed this by making some fundamental benefits always inherent to the character and never available via magic items.
7. **Teamwork.** A fun game is one where everyone gets a chance at the spotlight and every PC gets a little help from his friends. Many of the mechanics changes I've mentioned so far are also designed with this in mind. The playtests I've conducted show that it works very well. Victories more reliably feel like team victories rather than a collection of individual successes.
8. **Familiarity.** I am a grognard after all. I've created a system where you'll be just as comfortable running a classic adventure as you would running something that was published yesterday. All

the familiar tropes are here. Dwarves are dour, barbarians rage and magic missile always hits.

## Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to all the fine folks who volunteered so many hours of their time to playtest Enlightened Grogard and tell me how to make it better. Thank you for making this system so excellent!

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While some of the ideas in this rule system are new invention many are at least inspired by outstanding ideas that have appeared in other material. I've had the opportunity to examine a gamut of fantasy roleplaying games in the last two decades. I am grateful to these games and their authors for their inspiration.

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