

# LIGHTS... DICE... ACTION!

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Freeform Cinematic Role-Playing



Produced by John Higgins  
in association with  
Relative Entropy Games

## Introduction

My involvement in the Old School Renaissance is driven by a combination of two factors—nostalgia for the D&D that I grew up with; and a personal preference for “rules-lite” and story-based games over mechanics-heavy exercises in building customized characters. Most of the games in the OSR do a fine job of scratching both itches at once. When I want this sort of game, I can turn to *Labyrinth Lord* or *Dark Dungeons* or *Retro Phaze* and be happy.

But all of these “traditional” class-and-level games suffer from a certain inevitable degree of power-creep as campaigns wear on. There are many difficulties inherent in high-level D&D gameplay, and the desire to mitigate these difficulties has spawned countless other RPGs (to say nothing of hacks and patches, e.g. Epic Six). Also, character classes will always be regarded by some as too inflexible and unrealistic (usually leading to complex skill systems).

For these reasons, I was primed to search for an alternative to D&D that would fit certain criteria. It would have to accord with my preferred play-style: rules-lite, cinematic, simple, quick, flexible, more emphasis on story than combat. It would have to have something like “classes” and “levels” in order to *feel* like a traditional RPG... but preferably without restrictions and power-creep.

I found what I was looking for in *Altars & Archetypes*, a simple and elegant little RPG released under a “creative commons license”. What recommends this game most (to me) is its central mechanic: roll a pair of polyhedral dice and compare them to determine success or failure. This is as brilliant as it is “old-school”! After all, an RPG without the funny dice is hardly an RPG at all.

*Lights; Dice; Action!* (hereafter called simply “LDA”) is a free “hack” of *Altars & Archetypes*. The changes made herein serve two aims: firstly to give the game more of an old-school “fantasy RPG” framework; and secondly to emphasize episodic adventure and cinematic role-playing. Armed only with the few rules in this booklet and a set of gaming dice, you can play entertaining RPG campaigns that last for years!

## What You'll Need

Typical of an RPG, each player will need a pencil and a character sheet. The table should also be furnished with one or more sets of polyhedral dice—**d4, d6, d8, d10, d12, d16, and d20**. Note that this game uses a d16 (but makes no use of the much commoner d%). If a d16 cannot be found at your friendly local game store, the same effect can be achieved by flipping a coin and then rolling 1d8 (tails = “roll 1d8+0”; heads = “roll 1d8+8”). As per usual, a gridded surface and miniature figures are entirely optional.

## The Basics

Actions in *LDA* are resolved by rolling an action die and a difficulty die and comparing the results. If the result on the action die *equals* or *exceeds* the result on the difficulty die, the action has succeeded.

The difficulty die is usually chosen at the discretion of the game's Director (i.e. the referee/GM). Action dice, meanwhile, are determined by the player characters' *roles*. A “role” is a descriptive term that says something important about a character: roles are broader than skills, but perhaps narrower than character classes. Another term for a role would be an “archetype”.

Examples of roles include “soldier”, “warrior”, “swashbuckler”, “burglar”, “con-man”, “bard”, “thief”, “martial artist”, “samurai”, “viking”, “ch'i master”, “wizard”, “necromancer”, “priest”, “healer”, “druid”, “beast-master”, “noble”, “scholar”, “scientist”, “engineer”, “pilot”, “woodsman”, “barbarian”, “alchemist”, “blacksmith”, etc.

A role encompasses everything vital and immediate to that archetype, but nothing *beyond* the archetype. So, for example, a ranger character (like Aragorn) would have to have several roles (perhaps warrior, woodsman, noble, and healer) to cover all of the character's areas of competence. Conan of Cimmeria would almost certainly have “burglar” and “pirate” in addition to “barbarian” or “warrior”. Note that the list given above is by no means exhaustive—players can freely make up their own roles, subject to the Director's approval, of course. If some roles overlap a little, that's okay, but one role should never allow a character to do

*everything* (or even most things) well. No role, for example, should ever allow a character to both fight well and use magic—that would be too broad (which is why “martial artist” and “ch’i master”, for example, are kept separate). It would be best not to think of roles as classes per se, but rather as tight clusters of closely related skills. Characters are defined by their roles—and they always have more than one role to play!

In fact, characters in *LDA* do not have “scores” or “attributes” like those found in other RPGs (e.g. “Strength”, “Intelligence”, etc.). Instead, the characters’ roles *are* their stats! Each role is rated by associating it with a polyhedral die. The **d4** represents no special training or familiarity with a given role. (It’s used for “untrained” die rolls.) This means that all the roles a character *does* have will start with at least a **d6**. The d6 represents basic or apprentice-level competence, and a character’s skill can rise all the way up to 1d20, which represents world-class mastery of that role.

On the Director’s side of things, the same range of dice is also used to measure difficulty. The d4 represents a trivial or easy difficulty, all the way up to the d20, which is a task of epic or near-impossible difficulty. The Director is also free to use any modifiers or combinations desired (e.g. “2d6+1” or “1d8+1d10”) when setting difficulty dice—whatever seems to fit the situation best.

Whenever a character wishes to perform any action of uncertain outcome, the character simply rolls an appropriate role die (as action die) vs. the Director’s choice of difficulty die. If none of the character’s roles is particularly appropriate to the action (and the Director always has final say here), then 1d4 is used.

Remember, in most circumstances, the result of the difficulty die becomes the “target number” to be met or exceeded by the action die. Ties go to the side rolling the action die, not the difficulty die. Note as well that a system like this is highly freeform and flexible—and therefore requires a firm-handed Director, always ready to make fair and consistent rulings that serve the story without railroading the PCs!



## Character Creation

Making a character is simply a matter of deciding what sort of character to play, and then assigning dice to the character's roles and to another quality, *Initiative*. A character may begin the game with either two or three roles. If the player opts for two roles, then no further work is needed: both roles and the character's Initiative all begin at **d8**. If, on the other hand, the player would rather create a character with three roles, then they must distribute two **d8s** and two **d6s** among the four qualities (viz. three roles and Initiative).

If a player wishes to create a non-human character, this can be handled in either of two ways. First, the character's non-human species (whether we're talking about an elf, an alien, or whatever) could simply be "background noise" that affects role-playing but not the character's abilities. If this is the case, there's no need to bother assigning a die to the role. If, on the other hand, race is important enough to the game that it might allow the character to do special things, then the non-human race must also be one of the character's roles. In a typical high fantasy world, for example, elves can often do "elfy" things—sense the presence of goblins or evil magic, run on top of snow without falling through, see in the dark or out to great distances, prophecy about the future or recall the far distant past, shrug off charm spells and sleeping draughts—and in order to do these things, an elf character would need to have a role die for "elf".

Keep in mind that roles are always subject to Director approval, because roles must always be kept appropriate to the setting at hand. The Director might also (over the course of the game) need to tweak which actions a role die applies to, for game balance.

In addition to role dice and Initiative, characters begin the game with a few other qualities: **Health, Power, Armor, Karma, Move, and Load**. All characters begin the game with 10 Health Points (HP) and 1 Power Point (PP). Armor and Karma both start at 0 (although a character's Armor rating actually depends on what armor the character wears). All characters, regardless of race or species, begin with a Move of 4 (which means "4 inches per round" on the tabletop, or "40 feet per round" in the game-world). Load will be detailed a little later, when encumbrance is explained—and this quality *does* vary by race or species.

## Equipment

In addition to the above game statistics, characters are assumed to begin with whatever gear is necessary and appropriate to their roles. A warrior will carry a sword and shield; a mage will have a staff and a grimoire; and a gunslinger will have a six-shooter and plenty of bullets. Most characters will also start with some sum of money appropriate to the game-world (this could be as generic as "silver pieces" or as specific as "South Phantasian electrum ducats").

Generally speaking, equipment doesn't so much confer benefits as allow characters to function normally. A warrior attacking without a weapon will deal half damage in combat (round down if the character is completely unarmed; round up if the character thinks to use improvised weapons like barstools and potted plants, or if the character is some kind of monk or martial artist). A character caught without the basic armor worn most typically in the particular game setting (usually leather armor) suffers double damage from weapon attacks. A thief without lock-picks is in serious trouble, but that's nothing compared to a spell-caster without a grimoire!

There are a few special circumstances. A character who fights with a pair of weapons or a big two-handed weapon enjoys a +1 bonus to the action roll made when attacking. A character wearing heavier kinds of armor will benefit from an Armor score: 1 for chainmail or a shield, 2 for plate armor or chainmail plus a shield, and 3 for plate armor plus a shield. A character's Armor rating is deducted from any weapon damage sustained during combat.

## Resolution Mechanics

*LDA* uses a task-based resolution mechanic, where the Director sets the difficulty of a particular action on a scale ranging from d4 (easy) to d20 (nearly impossible). The character attempting the action makes an opposed roll using one of their role dice, as appropriate—but if they have no appropriate role die, they use d4 instead. If the roll of the action die equals or surpasses the roll of the difficulty die, the action succeeds—and the Director can use the difference between the rolls to determine the margin of success (or failure).

It's worth repeating that the Director has absolute discretion when it comes to setting the difficulty dice, deciding whether a particular role is appropriately related to the action being attempted, or even whether dice ought to be rolled at all. (It's better if the dice are only used for tense or important actions where the outcome is either very uncertain or has meaningful consequences.)

When one character attempts to perform an action on another character, and the targeted character attempts to resist the given action, then no difficulty die is rolled. Instead, the targeted character uses one of their own role dice to make a *resistance roll*. In this circumstance, the action succeeds if the roll on the action die surpasses the roll on the resistance die; but the resistance succeeds (thereby foiling the action) if the resistance roll equals or surpasses the action roll (i.e. ties go to the defender on opposed rolls). Note that if the resisting character is unable to actively resist the attack (or the Director decides that the attempt the player is making is wildly inappropriate to the situation or to the character role being used), the resistance die is automatically a minimum of d4.

*Situational Modifiers:* If a player comes up with a clever idea or description that exploits some situational advantage, the Director can award an extra +1d4 to the character's action roll (or resistance roll, if the particular defense was prepared beforehand). Multiple advantages increase the die type (to +1d6, +1d8, etc.). (N.B., there need not ever be situational modifiers to the difficulty die—the Director can merely increase the difficulty die itself.)

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Character Name \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Exp / Lvl \_\_\_\_\_

Description \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

HEALTH \_\_\_\_\_ ARMOR \_\_\_\_\_

POWER \_\_\_\_\_ KARMA \_\_\_\_\_

MOVE \_\_\_\_\_ LOAD \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

ROLE DICE

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ INITIATIVE \_\_\_\_\_



# Character Record Sheet

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EQUIPMENT

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TREASURE

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SPECIAL EFFECTS

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OTHER NOTES

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## Karma

Characters start the game with 0 Karma. During gameplay, characters can either gain or lose Karma points, to various effects. The Director can dispense Karma points to players as a reward for exceptionally good or heroic deeds (although, as a rule, a given player should not earn more than 1 Karma per game session). The Director can also deduct Karma for particularly vile or wicked actions (with the caveat that the Director should never deduct more than 1 Karma for a particular action).

Characters with positive Karma can choose to spend their Karma points, one at a time, in exchange for certain boons. 1 Karma can be spent to add automatic advantage (usually +1d4) to a die roll; or, provided the character is not in combat, 1 Karma can be spent to replenish 1d4 points of Health or 1 point of Power.

A character with negative Karma cannot spend Karma points. Such a character is, in fact, more of a villain than a hero and is in danger of becoming an NPC under the Director's control. Should the character's Karma ever fall to -10 or lower, the character sheet must be remanded into the Director's custody, and the player must create a new character.



## Combat

Combat is usually played out in ten-second combat rounds. (On larger scales, like mass battles, a ten-minute or even an hour-long round might make more sense.) At the beginning of each round, all the characters involved roll their Initiative die to determine order of actions (with high rolls going first). Each character can take one move and one action per round.

*Movement:* Movement can often be ignored when playing out battles “in the imagination”, but if a gridded surface and markers or miniature figurines are used, movement becomes an important tactical feature. Typically, 1” on the tabletop (whether unmarked or gridded with squares or hexagons) represents 10’ of distance in the game, although other scales are possible (depending on the situation). Player characters usually have a Move score of 4, which means that they can move 4 squares/hexagons/inches on the tabletop (i.e. 40’ in the game) and still take an action.

If a character wishes to give up their action in order to run as fast as possible, the player rolls the character’s Initiative die again, adding the result to their Move for the rest of that round. (For example: a character with Move 4 and Initiative d8 decides to take no actions in order to run across the battlefield as quickly as possible. If the character rolls a 5 on the d8, he could run 9” across the tabletop that round. N.B., the running roll is separate from the Initiative roll made at the beginning of the round to determine order of actions.)

Note that while all characters have a base Move of 4, certain races or species might be faster under certain circumstances. In this instance, they can add both their racial role die and their Initiative die to their Move when they run (such as when a centaur gallops across a level field, when a harpy flies through the air, or when a mermaid swims in the sea).

Generally speaking, characters must be adjacent to each other to attack one another in close combat, but there is no particular distance limit (apart from common sense, especially the Director’s) for ranged attacks or thrown spells.

*Encumbrance and Movement:* Characters can only carry so much gear. A typical human character has a “Load” limit of 3 stone (about 40 lbs.). For a smaller character (like a gnome or a hobbit), the limit would be 2 stone (a little under 30 lbs.). For a large character (like a centaur or an ogre), the limit would be 4 stone (about 55 lbs.). For each full “Load” that a character carries, the character’s Move is reduced by one point! (At 4 full loads, a character can’t move.)

*Resolving Attacks:* Attacks are resolved like any other opposed roll. The attacker rolls their appropriate role die; the defender may attempt to resist with appropriate role die as well, but take note that unlike many other RPGs, choosing to resist an attack actually takes that character's action for the round! The choice to resist (but lose your action) or not (and have to make do with a d4 for defense) is an important tactical choice, and it also highlights the importance of winning the Initiative on a given combat round. When the resistance roll meets or exceeds the attack roll, the defender has successfully avoided the attack and taken no damage. If the attack roll surpasses the resistance roll, the difference indicates the amount of damage dealt to the defender.

Remember that an attacker using a pair of weapons or a large two-handed weapon gets a +1 bonus to the attack roll. (Ranged weapons never get this bonus. Among melee weapons, it applies to weapons like great-swords and mauls, and to lances on a cavalry charge, but not to a weapon like a pike-staff or a pole-arm, which instead enjoys an extra 1" of reach.)

After the attack roll has been completely resolved, adjustments to the damage can be applied (halving the damage when the attacker is unarmed, doubling the damage when the defender is unarmored, or subtracting one or more points of damage when the character is heavily armored). The final damage figure is then subtracted from the character's Health Points. A character that falls to 0 HP is knocked out, possibly wounded, and possibly in danger of death (as determined by the situation and the Director's judgment).

Note that when damage occurs outside of combat (such as from a trap), the Director gauges the threat level and then assigns the hazard an "attack die" of the appropriate size. Sometimes, the character will have no chance at all to resist damage—in which case the Director can just roll damage and leave it at that.

*Healing Damage:* Characters heal naturally at a rate of 1 HP per night of rest. A character can also be healed of several HP at once by a skill or spell (using the difference between the action roll and a difficulty roll to find the number of HPs healed). A character can

only be healed by a healing skill once per day, but magical healing is possible as long as the healer has sufficient Power Points.

## **Special Effects**

Characters start the game with 1 Power Point. A character can spend 1 PP to attempt an extraordinary action. For a warrior, this might be a special sword maneuver that lets the character attack several foes with one strike. For a mage, a cleric, a psychic, a ch'i master, or a mad scientist, the effect is usually more explicitly supernatural or paranormal. Most characters recover expended Power at the same rate as Health (one point per night of rest).

A magic-using character does not have to expend Power for every little magic trick that the character might perform. A minor spell (a "cantrip") or a blast of energy meant to damage a single foe (which is little different from an archer shooting an arrow or a gunslinger shooting a bullet) hardly qualifies as momentous enough to warrant spending Power. Merely invoking the supernatural isn't enough; the character must be attempting to achieve an effect that couldn't normally be achieved *without* tapping some special power.

When a non-magical character (like a soldier or a thief) uses Power, the character is still largely constrained by the laws of physics and common sense. The character could perform some kind of special weapon maneuver or other impressive-but-mundane feat of prowess. But a warrior can't suddenly spend Power to fling a fireball or a thunderbolt.

Arcane characters, meanwhile, are constrained instead by a well-defined list of supernatural things that they know how to do. Wizards have their spells written in grimoires, while priests might be limited to a small selection of prayers. Alchemists have their formulas and mad scientists their blueprints. A ch'i master or a psychic might have to have spent years in training and traveled for thousands of miles to learn from hermits and wise men, just to have collected a few semi-magical mental powers. An arcane character's repertoire of specific abilities can be expanded through gameplay, but this should be a rare and special thing when it happens.

Mages, priests, psychics, and so forth can usually draw upon their powers at will. The character spends a Power Point and rolls the appropriate role die; the Director also assigns a difficulty die, and if the action roll fails, the Power Point is expended to no effect; but if the action roll succeeds, the spell or power works. For a scientist or an alchemist, “powers” are prepared ahead of time in the form of inventions or reagents. The Power Point is spent when the invention is built or the chemical is brewed; and the Power locked up in the item can only be recovered once the item is used up.

*Powers in Combat:* Under most circumstances, a character with an arcane role can use that role to attack with supernatural or paranormal power, just like a warrior attacking with a weapon. Making a supernatural attack meant to deal normal damage to a single target doesn’t expend any PP, but the attacker does need to beat both a difficulty die (d6) and the defender’s resistance roll with their own action roll. The difference between the action die and the resistance die determines damage; the difficulty die merely determines whether the supernatural power works. (N.B.—a monk or similar character can use “supernatural” unarmed skill to attack without weapons for full damage, merely by rolling against a d6 difficulty die as well as the defender’s resistance roll.)

Whenever a Power-based effect (whether supernatural or mundane) is aimed at causing more damage than usual, striking multiple foes at once, or having some other special result, a Power Point must usually be expended (subject to the Director’s discretion). As a rule, the more powerful the effect, the higher the difficulty die:

- d6 – Easy – Cantrip, magic bolt, kung fu, detect magic (no PP cost)
- d8 – Medium – Charm, bless, sense evil, blast several targets for half damage, basic healing magic
- d10 – Hard – Invisibility, lock/knock, hit several targets for full damage, strike a single target for double damage
- d12 – Wizardry – Large-area magic burst, “whirlwind” attack, cure unusual status effects, heal several wounded
- d16 – Lost Magic – Shape-change, short-range teleport, haste, full healing, stone to flesh, flight, magic wall
- d20 – Ultimate Magic – Teleport, resurrect, time/space magic

*Magical Treasure:* Over time, characters might acquire special items that bestow unique powers. Items like these are usually limited to a set number of uses per day (such as, for example, a wand that lets a mage throw a fire-bolt at +1d4, once per day), while certain other items (potions and scrolls) are consumed after one use. Still other items (like +1 swords, or “bane” weapons that deal double damage to particular kinds of monsters) confer permanent bonuses that always work. These are particularly rare.

Characters of 9th level and higher are permitted to create magical items, although this is always expensive, and the difficulty is high—d16 for single-use items, d20 for limited-use items, and even higher for permanent items (like magical weapons).

*Vitalizing:* Certain roles might permit characters to burn Health as well as Power in order to call upon the supernatural. Necromancers would be the archetypical example, although mad scientists (losing health due to too much time spent in the laboratory) and ch’i masters might also make sense under certain circumstances. Health spent in place of Power cannot be healed by any means other than mundane rest. And of course characters can never use Power to restore Power.

## **Experience Levels**

A single adventure in *LDA* is called an *episode*, and several adventures strung together (usually called a campaign in other games) is called a *series* here. A single “episode” of adventure can still span several game sessions. The game session is the basic unit of gameplay, reward, and character advancement.

At the end of a game session, the Director must decide how well the players have played. This should be a judgment call based on a combination of two factors: (1) how well have the characters succeeded at their goals, and (2) how well have the players role-played their characters? At the end of a typical game session, the Director should award 2 experience points (XP) to each player character. If they have performed better or worse than average, the Director can award 1 or 3 XP instead.

Starting characters are called “1st level” characters. With every 5 XP earned, the character gains a level, becoming 2<sup>nd</sup> level at 5 XP, 3<sup>rd</sup> level at 10 XP, and so forth. Gaining a level allows a player to make one of the following alterations to their character: (1) raise Health by 1 point, (2) raise Power by 1 point, (3) increase a role die by one die step, up to a maximum of d12, or (4) add a new role die at d6, provided the story allows for it and the Director approves.

When a character reaches 80 XP (17th level), the rules change slightly. From 17th level onward, role dice can be raised from d12 to d16. However, gaining levels above 17th requires double the experience (10 XP rather than 5 XP). From 25th level (160 XP) onward, role dice can be raised from d16 to d20 (the maximum).

## Monsters

The monsters, creatures, henchmen, and villains that the player characters will have to contend with are described very simply in *LDA*. All monsters have an Initiative die and Health Points. Monsters *might* have other qualities, like Armor and Power Points, depending on what they can do. Most importantly, monsters are described by role dice, just like player characters—but monster roles are more like descriptive words (big, scary, clawed, fire-breathing, sneaky, demonic, etc.) than archetypes or classes. A monster’s HP should be relative to its size and power (where 10 HP represents a roughly human-sized character with heroic potential).

