

Edna's 13th Age 2e Gamma Playtest GMG Feedback

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Special Thanks to

Exocist for being a player, and for refining much of this feedback.

Overall Impressions on the GMG

The *13th Age* 2e gamma playtest GMG is serviceable enough. I would not call it an especially good standalone GMing book, but it gets the job done.

The GMG comes across as written for people who are already veteran GMs, and definitely not for inexperienced GMs. It has an air of "You are already an experienced GM who knows how to run things, right? So we will give you only the bare minimum of guidance, and you can figure the rest out yourself." I do not know if this is the intention of Rob Heinsoo and Jonathan Tweet, but it certainly reads this way to me.

Terminology

The book tends to be inconsistent vis-à-vis terminology. Is it "the empire," or "the Empire"? Is it "imperial," or "Imperial"? Is it "the dark gods," or "the Dark Gods"? Is it "the gods of light," or "the Gods of Light"? Is it "iconic," "omega," or "zenith"? And so and so forth.

The Tiers and What They Actually Represent

- *D&D* 4e has three tiers: heroic (levels 1 to 10), paragon (11 to 20), and epic (21 to 30).
- *D&D* 5e has four tiers: tier 1, local heroes (levels 1 to 4), tier 2, heroes of the realm (5 to 10), tier 3, masters of the realm (11 to 16), and tier 4, masters of the world (17 to 20).
- [ICON](#) 1.5 (soon to be 2.0) has three tiers: chapter I (levels 0 to 4), chapter II (5 to 8), and chapter III (9 to 12).
- *13th Age* has three tiers: adventurer (levels 1 to 4), champion (5 to 7), and epic (8 to 10).

The first three games above take a moment to talk about what their tiers mean in-universe, the kind of heroic feats achievable by characters at each tier, and how tiers influence the scale and stakes of adventures. For example, the *D&D* 4e *Dungeon Master's Guide*, pp. 146-147, gives an elaborate breakdown, helping the DM grasp the significance of each tier; the *D&D* 5e *Dungeon Master's Guide* 2014, pp. 36-37, does much the same.

In contrast, *13th Age* 2e does not elucidate its tiers. It gets close at a couple of points.

The section on environments (GMG, pp. 354-355) is appreciable, but leaves too many questions. When a party enters "the danker swamps" or "the depths of the dangerous woods" as a champion-tier environment, what does that suggest about the scale and stakes of their adventure? When a party climbs "the most forbidding peaks" or "the upper reaches of the world" as an epic-tier environment, what is so epic about that, and what does it imply about the scale and stakes of their adventure?

The bestiary, likewise, explains little about in-universe scale and significance. A party faces down a steely-eyed commander leading savvy barbarians and demon-touched rangers, all 5th-level; is this band of scoundrels strong enough to be infamous across the Dragon Empire, or are they relatively unremarkable small fry? A party confronts a 13th-level double-strength balor; is this a big-shot demon lord, or just one of many heavy-hitting grunts that the Abyss spits out? A party draws steel against a 13th-level triple-strength ancient red dragon; should they triumph, will it be a deed exalted in the ages to come, or will it merely be one of many slayings of ancient reds in the 13th Age?

The Tiers and the Icons

Moreover, in a game with a heavy focus on NPC power players (icons), *13th Age* 2e does not elaborate on how tier progression influences a party's icon relationships. Is a champion-tier party relevant enough to speak directly to the Emperor, or do they have to be epic-tier for that? Is a champion-tier party considered competent enough for the Emperor to deploy **them** instead of a flight of imperial dragon riders, or do they have to be epic-tier for that?

Is an epic-tier party strong enough to fight an icon? Inasmuch as the villainous icons are the headline antagonists of the game, I can see a non-negligible number of players and GMs alike assuming that icons can be battled as endgame bosses game as final bosses, especially if a player has invested a 2-point negative relationship into a villainous icon. Can a GM upgrade a balor, or some other demon, to stand in for the Diabolist? Is it fine for the GM to level-boost, say, an ancient black, an ancient blue, or an ancient red to represent one of the Three?

(Yes, I am fully aware that Rob Heinsoo once mentioned in a Discord group call something about how icons are so strong that if 10th-level PCs were to fight icons, said PCs would be no better than mooks. However, I am trying to judge *13th Age* 2e gamma based on what is actually written in the playtest document, not based on what someone once said in a Discord voice chat that nobody actually recorded.)

A Little Guidance Would Be Nice

To be clear, I am **not** asking for the GMG to firmly dictate “power levels” or anything of the sort. I am **not** asking for, say, icon statistics. What I **am** asking for is a degree of guidance to help the GM grasp and devise a set of expectations based on the three tiers. Right now, there is very little such guidance.

A dedicated book for GMs should ideally minimize the amount of times the RPG has to say, “Well, the GM should figure that out for themselves.”

Aid, Group Checks, and Skill Challenges

- *D&D* 4e has rules for aid, group checks, and skill challenges.
- *Pathfinder* 2e has rules for aid, Victory Point challenges, influence/negotiation, research, chases, and infiltration.
- *ICON* has rules for aid, team actions, and, for complex noncombat challenges involving a series of rolls, clocks.
- *Draw Steel!* has rules for assisting a test and, for complex noncombat challenges involving a series of rolls, montages and negotiations.

13th Age 2e has no rules for aid, group checks, and skill challenges. Consider the following scenarios:

- One PC performs research in a library. Another PC steps in to help.
- One spellcasting PC conducts a ritual. A different PC, who could very well be another ritual caster, and who might even have the same spell on hand, lends assistance.
- All of the PCs sneak past a group of guards on high alert.
- All of the PCs disguise themselves and walk past a group of guards on high alert.
- The PCs infiltrate a Prince-run casino as guests, employees, or both. Their goal is to identify a specific mastermind lurking somewhere in the gambling establishment.
- The PCs chase an elusive mastermind across a city, weaving between alleyways and marketplaces, leaping from rooftop to rooftop.
- The PCs search for a number of arcane bombs scattered throughout a city, over the course of several hours.
- The PCs disarm an enormous arcane bomb, a fifteen-foot-wide cube, demanding several delicate procedures.
- The PCs unearth a long-lost library and spend hours upon hours poring over its ancient tomes to discern the location of the tomb of the Wizard King’s last living queen.
- The PCs undertake a perilous voyage to the easternmost of the Lamphaven Islands, evading the leviathans of the Iron Sea. **(The GM considers such a journey dangerous enough to warrant actual rolls with consequences, making a montage ill-suited.)**
- The PCs close the metaphysical epicenter of a hellhole before it reaches critical mass, requiring a series of mundane ceremonies and magical operations.
- The PCs talk down a general of the Crusader, or perhaps the Crusader himself, from burning down an allegedly Abyss-tainted city.
- The PCs convince a hierophant of the High Druid, or maybe the High Druid herself, to not devastate New Port with a cascade of natural disasters.

The GMG currently lacks guidance on how to handle the situations above, precisely due to the lack of rules on aid, group checks, and skill challenges. Sure, it is possible for a crafty GM to improvise mechanics for each of the above scenarios, but again, a standalone book for GMs should ideally minimize the amount of times the RPG has to say, “Well, the GM should figure that out for themselves.”

What About Montages?

For one, montages have not changed much from the alpha document, so I will just reiterate [my previous criticism of the montage section](#).

For two, montages currently have no rolls. They are ill-suited for, say, a complex challenge that the GM thinks is dangerous enough to warrant actual rolls with consequences. There is a note that the authors are **likely** considering adding some skill checks to montages, but we do not have those rules yet; I am reviewing the in-progress product that we currently have, not a hypothetical future project that is promised.

For three, montages are specialized in travel scenes. They do not handle, for example, the “disarm an enormous arcane bomb” or “negotiate with an important person” scenario particularly well.

Flight

The game never explains how flight actually works from a mechanical perspective. This is important for several monsters. How does it work, and how does poor flight work?

How We Handled It at Our Table

We borrowed and interpreted the 1e *13 True Ways* flight rules, [like so](#).

Broad Impressions on Monsters

As a matter of personal preference, and speaking as someone who enjoys the monsters of games like *D&D* 4e, *ICON*, and *Draw Steel!*, I do not particularly appreciate the monsters in the *13th Age* 2e gamma playtest GMG. I say this as someone who has piloted the gamma document’s monsters across [dozens of battles](#).

I think that the monsters are too simplistic and luck-based. When I was controlling them, I often found that the monsters were essentially slot machines on auto-pilot, with minimal meaningful choices other than “Which PC do I try to focus down this turn?”

Take the seven-headed hydra, for example, an iconic/omega/zenith-tier double-strength. What does it do during combat? **Run around and spam raw damage melee attacks.** Do characters have to do anything special to vanquish this legendary beast? Nope; the party vanquishes the monster by overloading it with damage, same as any other beastie. The hydra can shrug off a great many conditions, so defeating it is essentially a brute-force DPR race. When upgraded with nastier specials, *poisonous blood* and *pyrohydra*, the seven-headed hydra... still just runs around and spams attacks, except that it can now replace raw damage melee attacks with raw damage *fiery breaths* that target 1d2 PCs at a time.

Then there are the monsters whose attacks deliver special effects... which are gated behind random dice rolls. This means that there are few abilities that the GM can thoughtfully, tactically opt to deploy. It also means that players have little ability to devise stratagems based on what their enemies can reliably choose to do.

For example, the medusa noble is also an iconic/omega/zenith-tier double-strength. Their *petrifying gaze* is locked behind layers of random dice rolls. On their turn, the noble just **engages and spams melee attacks if that is possible, or simply spams ranged attacks otherwise**. Their gaze is only ever triggered as a random occurrence. There are few special tactics to fighting a medusa noble other than “Try to roll well, and hope that they roll poorly,” which emphasizes raw dice luck more than any player- or GM-influenceable tactics. (Yes, there is also the option of attacking from far away, but that is not practical for every PC.) And this is an iconic/omega/zenith-tier double-strength, not some low-level grunt.

You would think that iconic/omega/zenith-tier double-strengths would be high-level and powerful enough to warrant being given combat options other than attack spam, but apparently not.

Awkward Monster Selection

The array of monsters available in the bestiary, before any level and strength adjustments, is rather awkward.

- There are plenty of low-level monsters, but very few high-level enemies, constraining a GM's options as the levels increase.
- Double- and triple-strength monsters are somewhat rare at the low levels, but gradually overtake the monster list. By 6th level, double- and triple-strength monsters become just as frequent as standards and mooks. By 7th level, they become **more** common, and all of the 11th-, 12th-, and 13th-level monsters are double- or triple-strength.
- The monster list eventually becomes oversaturated with wrecker-role monsters. For example, **all** of the 12th- and 13th-level monsters are double- or triple-strength wreckers.
- Wrecker oversaturation at higher levels is especially awkward, because the table in page 348 advises that “As with mooks, the more wreckers you have, the more dangerous they are, so usually no more than half the team's firepower should come from mooks/wreckers.”
- The wrecker role is not even that well-defined to begin with. Wreckers are supposedly heavy-hitting glass cannons, but only some of them have below-average defenses. A marilith or a balor certainly is not fragile, for example. In practice, the wrecker role is a catch-all for “monsters who deal plenty of damage,” which is uselessly vague and all-encompassing. In contrast, roles like “archer” or “caster” suggest a specific playstyle.

Changing Monster Strength

Page 458 talks about how it is possible to simply adjust a monster's strength. “An easy way to do something new with a monster is to change its strength: mook, standard, elite, double, and triple. For example, the human thug is standard strength, so if you want a mob of lesser thugs you can apply modifiers and turn the human thug into a mook.”

This is an underdeveloped idea. It works **only** for monsters that deal damage and do nothing else. For example, let us take a fire giant.

• **Page 408, Fire Giant, from 8th-level Double-Strength to 4th-level Weakling:** –4 to d20 rolls and defenses, hit points and damage multiplied by $\times 0.1$. Number of melee attacks goes down to just one, melee attack modifier goes down to +9, melee weapon damage goes down 7, melee ongoing damage goes down to 2, ranged attack modifier goes down to +9, ranged weapon damage goes down to 4, ranged ongoing damage goes down to 1, hit points go down to 32. AC 21, PD 17, MD 13.

• **Page 408, Fire Giant, from 8th-level Double-Strength to 4th-level Mook:** –4 to d20 rolls and defenses, hit points multiplied by $\times 0.05$, damage multiplied by $\times 0.1$. Number of melee attacks goes down to just one, melee attack modifier goes down to +9, melee weapon damage goes down 7, melee ongoing damage goes down to 2, ranged attack modifier goes down to +9, ranged weapon damage goes down to 4, ranged ongoing damage goes down to 1, hit points go down to 16. AC 21, PD 17, MD 13.

The fire giant, a wrecker who simply deals damage, is reasonable enough when dropped down to a 4th-level weakling or mook. Although all the saving throws that the fire giant prompts will be a hassle to resolve during actual gameplay, the math works out just fine.

But what happens when we apply the same operation to a monster that delivers nasty nondamaging effects, such as a spoiler?

• **Page 451, True Vampire, from 10th-level Standard to 6th-level Weakling:** –4 to d20 rolls and defenses, hit points and damage multiplied by $\times 0.2$. Attack modifier goes down to +11, damage goes down 10, regeneration goes down to 2, hit points go down to 50. AC 20, PD 18, MD 20.

• **Page 451, True Vampire, from 10th-level Standard to 6th-level Mook:** –4 to d20 rolls and defenses, hit points multiplied by $\times 0.1$, damage multiplied by $\times 0.2$. Attack modifier goes down to +11, damage goes down 10, regeneration goes down to 1, hit points go down to 25. AC 20, PD 18, MD 20.

On the surface, this would appear to be reasonable under the game's math... until we remember that the weakling- or mook-ified vampire gets to keep their full “*Natural 11+:*” rules text. A party getting repeatedly slammed by these weaklings or mooks is sure to have their resources brutally ground down.

The rules for changing monster strength really, really need a measure of guidance on how to adjust nondamaging effects.

Undervalued Targeting

The bestiary in general, as well as the monster-building guidelines, tend to undervalue the ability to target PD or MD instead of AC. The former two are usually lower than the latter, and yet attacks against PD or MD “cost nothing,” not even a reduced attack bonus.

Engaged melee attacks “cost” just as much as close-quarters attacks, or even nearby or far-away attacks, which are plainly superior due to their freedom of targeting. Not having to worry about being intercepted is a **significant** boon to a combatant.

Also undervalued is multitarget damage. Yes, I am aware that there is [an internal set of guidelines for multitarget damage](#), but they are simply too generous. Spread-out damage is inherently worse than concentrated damage, obviously, but if a three-target attack's damage is set to merely 70% of a single-target attack's damage, then that is a fantastic deal for a monster trying to crunch down three PCs.

Monsters That Present Interesting Decisions

The most well-written monsters, in my opinion, are the ones that present interesting decisions. My player, Exocist, has already created a list of monsters that prompt interesting decisions, so [I will just link to that](#).

I would like to add two things, however:

- The rancor demon in the beta was renamed the hammer demon in the gamma, page 389, and its “hit me at least once a round, or I will deal heavy damage” gimmick was given to a new humanoid NPC, the zealous killer, page 432.
- I actually like the rough mechanical concept of the orcs. The PCs want to spread around the damage rather than focusing down individual targets, so as to disable the orcs’ extra offense! It is just that, well... the game is **much** too generous in statting out orcs.

The Strongest Monsters in the Game for Their MEQs, in No Particular Order

- **Page 440, Orc Berserker, Orc Blood Shrieker:** Orc berserkers have fantastic survivability (~43% more hit points than what an elite should have, and then another hit to take them down while *unstoppable*). Orc shriekers are likewise durable (40% more hit points than what a standard-strength should have) and are capable of increasing the hit, and, by extension, critical chances of orcs. What do berserkers and shriekers sacrifice for all of this? Berserkers have 1 less AC than normal, and shriekers have 1 less defenses than normal. That is it. These are durable, heavy-hitting juggernauts.
- **Pages 385-386, Despoiler; Page 389, Despoiler Mage:** *Discord* is a quick action for making PCs attack each other. *Whispers* is either decent damage and turn-sabotaging confusion, or a tremendous spike of damage that can tear away most of a character’s hit points. (Note that a vanilla despoiler upgraded to 8th level actually has better numbers on *whispers* than a despoiler mage.) Despoilers and despoiler mages simply have too much raw damage going for them.
- **Pages 448-449, Troglodytes:** Hindered is a significantly debilitating condition; it denies martial powers and spellcasters spells. So why are troglodytes inflicting hindered automatically, no roll needed? A single mob of 8th-level trog underlings winning initiative can [instantly spell doom](#) for a party.
- **Pages 400-402, Blue Dragon:** *Flip-you tricks*, *escalator*, a breath weapon that can daze, and, most importantly, *counter-spell*. A blue dragon can arrest the party’s tempo by shutting down exactly the right spell at exactly the right moment. They are the strongest of the dragons for their MEQs, I think.

Dragons Are Too Samey, Youngs Are a Hassle to Run, and Their Damage Math is All Over the Place

Yes, dragons are deliberately overpowered. It helps to understand why. Firstly, and least importantly, dragons have good defenses. Secondly, their breath weapons are **sometimes** rather strong, depending on the specific age and color; a party **might** live or die based on how frequently a dragon successfully recharges their breath. Thirdly, and most significantly, *flip-you tricks* can significantly impede attempts at alpha-striking. *Flip-you tricks* are particularly nasty against characters who require a certain dice roll, such as raging barbarians, who would dearly love to land a natural **odd** hit.

All this said, I do not find the mechanical design for dragons to be compelling. Youngs of a given color are not much different from ancients of the same color. An ancient is, for the most part, a young with larger numbers. Even dragons across colors blur together; their ideal combat tactics are practically identical, and **greens** and **blues** both daze with their breaths. I consider **red dragons** to be the biggest disappointments, because they are yet another bunch of brute-force wreckers, and because their breath weapons specialize in targeting larger parties as opposed to smaller groups.

I have run several combats involving young dragons. Because they are standard-strength monsters, I had to field plenty of them, which proved to be a great hassle. Dragons might have few tactical decisions to make, but they force plenty and plenty of dice-rolling and resource-tracking across the table. Managing this for five or more young dragons was an unpleasant chore for me.

Dragons’ attack and damage math is highly inconsistent, even within the exact same color. Sometimes, a young dragon scaled up to the level and strength of an old or an ancient turns out to have superior attack, damage, or both. Take the young white dragon, for example. Upgrade it to a 4th-level double-strength (hit points and damage multiplied by ×3.2), and its claws and breath outdamage those of an old white. Upgrade a young white to a 5th-level triple-strength (hit points and damage multiplied by ×6), and its claws and breath likewise outdamage those of an ancient white. And yet, upgrade a young black to a 9th-level triple-strength, and it lags behind an ancient black’s attack bonuses. Where is the consistency here?

Other Above-the-Curve Monsters, Also in No Particular Order

- **Pages 377-378, Giant Hunting Spider:** Low damage, but a large cluster of these as lower-MEQ enemies can stunlock characters.
- **Pages 392-393, Derro Sage:** A single derro sage on the field can sabotage PC turns by flinging out confusion.
- **Page 415, Clay Golem:** Deployed as lower-MEQ enemies, they can gravely drain a party’s recoveries while turning attacks into coin flips.
- **Pages 424-425, Manticore:** Despite being a troop (or an archer/troop in the monster list table), a manticore is more like an idealized wrecker in terms of its balance between offense and defense. A manticore can open up from range, double-tapping three PCs each, and then attack in melee for great damage with their *claws* and *maw* routine.
- **Page 429, Archer Outlaw:** High accuracy, high damage, and high critical chances let them focus-fire a single PC into the ground. They are, however, limited by a pesky “the nearest enemy” stipulation, but that makes them actually interesting as units with genuine tactical choices.
- **Page 430, Death Cult Neophyte:** Like the despoiler (mage), except less inordinately powerful. A single neophyte is not that threatening, but a whole cluster of them can create a large flood of damage, all targeting MD and focused on a single target. Their *death curse* is nothing to ignore, either.
- **Page 431, Demon-Touched Ranger:** Ranged attacks that do not provoke, deal standard damage, and daze.
- **Pages 435-436, Ogre Mage:** The cone does heavy damage, and the friendly fire (friendly cold?) can be mitigated by bringing allies with *resist cold* or, yes, an ogre mage’s very own *resist exceptional*. Attacking and missing an ogre mage can also rob a PC of a turn due to confusion.
- **Page 440, Orc Warrior:** Like the orc berserker, except non-elite, and not quite as gifted in terms of durability: only ~25% more hit points than normal, and no *unstoppable* temporary hit points.
- **Page 446, Skeleton Archer:** Higher-than-normal accuracy, slightly below-average damage, and most importantly, the ability to target any PC out to nearby or far away. Being a skeleton, such a monster also happens to have *resist weapons 16+*, which brings us to...

Resist Weapons

I really, really do not like the *resist weapons* mechanic and similar resistances, such as those of gargoyles. The mechanic does nothing but punish martial characters and slow down the game in a martial-heavy party. If the entire encounter consists of enemies with *resist weapons*, such as the skeleton fight in the GMG’s premade adventure, there is no counterplay other than “suck it up if you are a martial, and try to leave this to the spellcasters.”

The Hydra Hall of Shame

Hydras have very weak offense because they have to split their attacks up and multitarget, except that they do not actually have the generous multitarget math that every other monster with a multitarget power receives, and they are hard-capped at [3/4] attacks if they start their turn unengaged and can engage only one opponent. I have seen hydras in play three times, such as in [this](#) fight.

Permanent Magic Items

Once again as a matter of personal preference, I do not like the permanent magic items section of the *13th Age* 2e gamma playtest *GMG*. I find it to be the weakest facet of the entire document. Pages 471 to 475 spend a great deal of word count building up mystique for permanent magic items: each has a story, each is one-of-a-kind (even from a loot distribution perspective!), each is alive, each has a personality...

Then, when we get to the permanent magic items themselves, we see that the great bulk of them are fiddly combat-numbers-riggers and nothing more. In my opinion, this is grossly wasted potential, and it only reinforces the idea that permanent magic items exist solely to adorn a PC like Christmas tree decorations and boost those combat numbers higher and higher.

Ambiguous Activations

Several magic items have unclear usages: are they activated pre-roll, or can they be activated post-roll? Two examples are the *boots of ferocious charge* and the weapon of *soul striking*.

How We Handled It at Our Table

Whenever there is such an ambiguity, it is to be assumed that the item can be used post-roll.

Annoying Activations

Virtually anything that has to be used pre-roll, especially anything that has to be used pre-roll on someone else's turn, like the *boots of winking*, is something I have found very awkward to resolve in actual gameplay.

Increasesers of Alpha Strike Accuracy

Several permanent magic items exist to do nothing but make a character's alpha-strike routine more accurate. **The** most egregious example is the *manual of puissant skill at arms*, which allows, for example, a paladin with Evil Way to more reliably land their enemy-exploding smite. A melee attack reroll with a +4 bonus is significant.

Other examples include:

- **Page 481, *Tome of Arcane Mysteries*:** Fix an arcane spell attack roll.
- **Page 483, *Archer's Gauntlets*:** Reroll a ranged weapon attack roll.
- **Page 483, *Gloves of True Striking*:** For assuring a hit against a known AC, and making it a natural even, helping Bow Fighters use *battle drill* and rangers activate Twin Arrows.
- **Page 485, *Harsh Luck*:** Reroll an attack roll, perhaps taking some damage.
- **Page 489, *Steady*:** Same as the gloves above, except exclusive to ranged weapons.

None of these are gated behind the escalation die.

Increasesers of Raw Damage

Even more brute-force than the accuracy-fixers are the permanent magic items that simply make the character deal more damage, whether for an alpha-strike or for encounter-long sustained damage. **The** largest offender here is *fickle fate*, which provides an on-demand spike of extra damage, each and every battle.

Other examples include:

- **Page 482, *Boots of Ferocious Charge*:** Add damage.
- **Page 483, *Gauntlets of Clobbering*:** Add damage.
- **Page 483, *Gloves of Power*:** Add damage.
- **Page 483, *Gloves of Mind Rot*:** Add damage.
- **Page 486, *Staff of Inner Power*:** Add damage (or healing), admittedly with a recovery cost, but a very manageable one.
- **Page 487, *Wand of Cold Fire*:** Add damage.
- **Page 488, *of Soul Striking*:** Add damage, admittedly with a recovery cost, but a very manageable one.
- **Page 488, *of Abandon*:** Add damage.
- **Page 488, *Flaming*:** Add damage. (Is it battle-long, or is it just for one attack? If it is just for one attack, that would make it worse than I thought.)

None of these are escalation-die-gated, either.

The Cursed Items That Are Worth It

Page 490 mentions: "The point of cursed items, and especially cursed weapons, is that they tend to provide a bonus that is superior to normal items at their tier. Some players adore that type of thing and willingly use cursed items because they think the math goes in their favor."

In some cases, yes, the math does, in fact, pan out in the characters' favor. The extra +1 attack and damage bonus from the anti-rally weapons is a good deal when potions exist, and the *wand of the bloodless mage* is a tiny price for a 2nd-, 3rd-, or 4th-level PC.

If the Authors Want Players and GMs to Think of Magic Items as More than Just Fiddly Combat-Numbers-Riggers...

Then I think it would be best for the book to focus on presenting magic items that are not, in fact, mostly combat-numbers-riggers. I do not think there is a pressing need for a dozen or so items that exist solely to help a PC attack more accurately and deal larger damage.

Incidentally, a reduction of emphasis on all the combat-numbers-rigging magic items would reduce the need for the *GMG* to sharply insist that the GM be the one to choose magic items for the party. Such insistence is born from a fear that players might "set up the entire party with a killer combo based on a few specific items," but this **would not be an issue in the first place** if permanent magic items were not chiefly combat-numbers-riggers.

At the very least, it would be nice if the "essential" bonuses like attack bonuses, damage bonuses, defense bonuses, and so on were integrated into PC level progression math. This way, players and GMs would not feel obligated to outfit the party with, for example, magic weapons and implements **just** to get that essential attack and damage bonus onto the characters.

GMG Page 311

This page establishes that the game world is flat. Some suggestions on the nature of heavenly bodies would be appreciated.

GMG Page 312

The table mentions “secret organizations loyal to the Blue or the Black.” Where can followers of the Red be found?

GMG Pages 328, 334

I am not a fan of the idea of an Emperor, if not the Blessed Emperor, being the one to tame the Midland Sea. It really seems like this should be an Archmage job instead, which would reinforce the theme of the Archmage seeking to control nature, and heighten the conflict between said nature-controlling Archmage and the High Druid.

GMG Page 336

A vampiric ogre mage being an example of an epic-tier villain is a little awkward, because it is something that a GM would have to kitbash together, rather than a monster already visible in the bestiary.

GMG Page 346

I do not think it is a good idea to mention the possibility of fielding monsters 3 or 4 levels higher than the battle level, because they can be awkward on the game’s math, and because they are not accounted for in the battle-building tables. Similarly, I think it is questionable to suggest “If you throw a weakling into the mix without counting it against your total, that seems fine,” because it gives the impression that fielding a battle level +2 weakling without counting it against MEQs is fine, even though such a weakling is worth a non-negligible 1 MEQ.

GMG Pages 347-348, 349-350

The entry for troops in the table says, “Troops are the only role that works even if all the monsters on the team have the same role,” which raises some questions about the whole “Vs. One Monster Type or Vs. One Monster” section. Does this mean that if the GM plans on fielding only one monster type, or only one monster, it should probably be a troop? The line about “Troops work great if you want all the monsters to be the same” would appear to corroborate this.

I find this to be worded confusingly. I think that the monster role table does not mesh well with the “Vs. One Monster Type or Vs. One Monster” section.

For that matter, the game has too few triple-strength troops to serve as ideal solo bosses. And by “too few,” I mean exactly one: the ancient white dragon.

GMG Pages 347, 368

The second asterisk, “Probably a mistake to build a battle around monsters that dish out damage like these do,” is worded very confusingly. If it is “probably a mistake,” then why is it being suggested in the encounter-building tables at all? If the intent is to convey something like, “Be especially careful about the single-hit damage output of these monsters, which can devastate a PC with just one attack,” why not say that instead?

HH Page 299, GMG Pages 348

The *HH*, p. 299, implies that an all-mook battle might be possible. The *GMG*, p. 348, advises that “usually no more than half the team’s firepower should come from mooks/wreckers.”

GMG Page 350

How are reinforcements calculated in terms of MEQs? Since they come later into a battle, they are obviously worth less than monsters that are deployed from the outset.

GMG Pages 353-354

Do battlefield dangers scale by PC tier, or by environment tier? The document does not explain.

The scaling on battlefield dangers can be rough, since there are only three breakpoints corresponding to the three tiers. A 1st-level party in a heroic-tier toxic area is much more imperiled than a 4th-level party in a heroic-tier toxic area.

What does the blessing of blood’s “Even misses are hits” actually mean, if it later mentions “Alternatively, limit the effect to just melee attacks, just magical attacks, natural even misses, etc.”?

Also, it is odd how shades of the damned have a flat counter-magic MD of 25 across all tiers.

GMG Page 353, HH Page 87

How does Desperate Inspiration interact with the destruction function of *turn undead*?

GMG Pages 356-357

The sample traps and obstacles being only adventurer-tier does not help the GM gain a picture for what champion- and epic-tier traps and obstacles could look like.

GMG Pages 358-361

As far as I can see, skill checks are explained here, in the *GMG*, and not in the *HH*. This seems like an oversight; players absolutely do deserve to know how skill checks work, right in the *HH*.

I am not a fan of the “When a PC rolls a 1 with a skill check, the skill check automatically fails, perhaps in a particularly bad way” rule in the slightest. If a cleric makes a level + Wisdom modifier + background check against a rakshasa’s DC 25 disguise, and the cleric has a modifier of +24 to the check, I do not see why a natural 1 should foist an automatic failure on the cleric: “especially in a particularly bad way.”

I think that natural 1 automatic failures should be an optional rule, especially since natural 20s giving extra benefits is worded as optional. “When a PC rolls a natural 20 with a skill check, the GM is free to give that character a hell of a lot more success than the player expected.”

GMG Pages 361-363

How do rituals interact with spells that a character has multiple uses of per arc, such as the adventurer feat for the wizard’s *utility spell*?

The rituals section mentions the wizard’s High Arcana talent, but that has nothing to do with rituals. It should probably refer to the wizard’s ritual casting champion feat: but even then, does said champion feat waive the “gather ingredients” step?

The second example mentions the bard’s *glamor* spell, which does not exist.

GMG Pages 363-365

Montages have not changed much from the alpha document, so I will just reiterate [my previous criticism of the montage section](#).

GMG Page 367

- If a character opts for a recovery as an incremental change, do all of their recovery dice change to the new level?
- If a character elects to gain a new power or spell as an incremental advance, is it a temporary, free addition? Or is it a replacement? If it is a replacement, how does it work?
- If a power or spell is taken as an incremental advance, is it used with a higher attack bonus? Is it used with higher WEAPON damage considered to be higher while using it?

How We Handled It at Our Table

- If a character opts for recovery as an incremental advance, all of their recovery dice change to the new level.
- If a character elects to gain a new power or spell as an incremental advance, it replaces one of their unexpended powers or spells. If the character already possesses the power or spell, then it **must** be presently unexpended to be selected as an incremental advance, and the higher-level version of the power or spell **must** replace the lower-level version. The replaced power or spell **cannot** be a temporary one, such as from Touch of Chaos.
- A power or spell taken as an incremental advance has higher level-based attack bonus only if it specifically uses level-based attack bonus as part of its scaling, and it has higher WEAPON only if it specifically uses WEAPON as part of its damage scaling.

GMG Page 370

Do NPCs and monsters have to care about drawing and sheathing weapons? If they do, how should their unarmed attacks be stated out?

How We Handled It at Our Table

Because weapon-wielding monsters and NPCs do not actually have their unarmed attacks stated out (thus requiring the GM to fuzzily estimate an appropriate attack modifier and damage), they do *not* have to care about drawing and sheathing weapons. For example, an archer outlaw can always use *backup blade* for an opportunity attack. (Yes, this is awkward, but it is the only way to avoid forcing the GM to eyeball unarmed attacks.)

GMG Page 381

How does the bulette’s *savage response* nastier special interact with its “*Limited use*” line?

GMG Pages 385, 389, and Anything Else That Involves Forced Attacks

Confusion, a despoiler (mage)’s *sow discord*, and other effects can force PCs to make attacks. Who chooses the weapon, and who chooses the precise attack?

How We Handled It at Our Table

Some effects, such as confusion and a despoiler’s *sow discord*, force attacks. The GM chooses the weapon, but the player can choose the precise attack.

GMG Page 386

Does *oscillating bolt* check if the skwazzit is staggered, or if the target is staggered?

GMG Page 387

Does the vrock’s *miasma of decay* nastier special stack? Can it turn a recovery value negative, causing someone to take damage from recoveries?

GMG Page 388

Does a hezrou’s *Abyssal sergeant* nastier special stack?

GMG Pages 388, 390

How does *beguiling gaze* actually work? How exactly does moving “past” enemies provoke opportunity attacks? This does not quite line up with the HH’s rules for opportunity attacks, which require engagements.

How We Handled It at Our Table

Since this specific playtest campaign uses a [one-dimensional guideline for tracking positioning](#), *beguiling gaze* forces the target to directly approach the beguiler demon or marilith. For each enemy that the target passes, regardless of whether that enemy is engaged or disengaged, that enemy is entitled to an opportunity attack against the target; as is specified, the target can make a disengage check to avoid the opportunity attack.

GMG Page 393

What counts as a “giggling derro”?

GMG Page 393

What is the range of *mind scream*?

How We Handled It at Our Table

Mind scream has a range of nearby.

GMG Page 395

Can killer instinct add to other creatures’ attack rolls? Can the crit range increaser be stacked multiple times on a single attack? Does the opportunity attack denial function of a *flip-you trick* have to be declared before any opportunity attack roll is made, or can it be declared afterwards? Can a *flip-you trick* reroll a critical hit against PD or MD?

How We Handled It at Our Table

Killer instinct **cannot** add to other creatures’ attack rolls. The crit range increaser **cannot** be stacked multiple times on a single attack. The opportunity attack denial function of a *flip-you trick* must be declared before the attack is rolled. The PD- and MD-rerolling functions do not work against critical hits.

GMG Pages 396-403

I find the wording of *intermittent breath weapon* to be on the obtuse side. I had to read it several times before I arrived at the conclusion of “by the end of the dragon’s turn, check if the breath weapon had been used at all during that turn.”

GMG Page 398

A young black dragon should probably have PD 18, not PD 28.

Why is an ancient black’s *draconic grace* a d8, not a d6?

GMG Pages 401-402

What is the timing of *counter-spell*? Can it be declared after rolls have been made for a spell, or must it be declared before any rolls? If it must be declared before any rolls, does the *counter-spell* resolve after the spell is cast but before the effect has taken place, or before the spell is cast?

How We Handled It at Our Table

For the sake of a quick and dirty ruling on a mechanic with ambiguous timing, *counter-spell* is ruled to match the wizard’s *counter-magic* (which, admittedly, is highly inconvenient in actual play, but it cannot be helped).

GMG Pages 401-402

Why is the old blue dragon so different in statistics from the young and ancient blue dragons?

GMG Page 414

How does *dangerous mooks* work if there are multiple mobs of bugbear minions in play?

GMG Page 415

How does the flesh golem’s *energy magnet* interact with, for example, *lightning bolt*?

GMG Page 420

How does hydra head-sprouting work if a hydra is one-shotted?

How We Handled It at Our Table

A hydra’s head-sprouting can bring it back from 0 hit points to [40/100], always. Thus, if a hydra were to take a hypothetical [200/540] damage, the hydra would pop back at [40/100] hit points with one extra head. From there, if the hydra takes another [40/100] damage, the hydra would, for the last time, pop back at [40/100] hit points with one extra head. Hydras are underpowered enough for their MEQs, and need all the help they can get.

HH Page 296, GMG Page 424

Do monster entries that say, “*Natural 11+*” or “*Natural 2–5*” or something similar, apply on a miss?

How We Handled It at Our Table

If a monster or NPC attack says, “*Natural 11+*” or “*Natural 2–5*” or something similar, it applies hit or miss. Otherwise, monsters like the lizardfolk warrior would not make sense. The line about “the default is that attack effects occur on a hit unless otherwise specified” is interpreted to refer to baseline hit effects, not anything else specific to a certain natural die roll.

GMG Page 431

What is the range of the demon bow, and other bow attacks with unlisted ranges?

How We Handled It at Our Table

The range of the demon bow is nearby or far away. In general, if a range is missing for a bow, it should be nearby or far away.

GMG Page 433

What is the range of *witchfyre*?

How We Handled It at Our Table

The range of *witchfyre* is nearby or far away.

GMG Page 435

What counts as “a limited attack (not an at-will attack)”? Is a smiting basic melee attack a “limited attack”? Is an attack upgraded by *lethal hunter* a “limited attack”?

How We Handled It at Our Table

A “limited attack” checks if the attack uses **any** non at-will resource whatsoever.

GMG Page 440

Can the orc blood shrieker’s *accursed spear* damage themselves?

HH Pages 285, 292-294; GMG Pages 399, 442

What are the mechanics for enemies retreating in general? How do enemies declare a retreat? A dragon can be given a special ability specifically called “*retreat*,” which simply replicates the PC rules for retreating, but no such ability is given to an owlbear, who can “attempt to retreat” (and potentially fail, given the word “attempt”). Additionally, the *HH*, p. 292, raises the possibility of enemies retreating and the PCs chasing them down.

How We Handled It at Our Table

If a dragon specifically needs to be given a special ability called “*retreat*” in order to replicate the PC rules for retreating, and the *HH*, p. 292, raises the possibility of enemies retreating and the PCs chasing them down, then the GM has to default to the loose suggestion given in the *HH*, p. 292. As a quick action, a monster or an NPC can declare a retreat for the enemy side. A single PC can attempt to stop this with a Strength-based skill check of a normal DC for the environment, or a hard DC if the enemies are narratively faster. On a success, the PC places themselves next to the monster or enemy who had declared the retreat; on a failure, the enemies retreat, and combat is over.

GMG Page 445

When does the extra damage from the sahuagin’s barbed bolt trigger?

GMG Page 445

What happens if the Blackamber skeletal legionnaire would reduce the initiative of the **last** creature in initiative?

GMG Page 451

Does deathly touch allow a limited-use feat to be sacrificed?

How We Handled It at Our Table

Deathly touch does not allow limited-use feats to be sacrificed. Only spells, powers, and talents count.

GMG Page 458

Does initiative get directly upscaled or downscaled with each level?

How We Handled It at Our Table

Initiative is, in a way, a “d20 stat,” so each level added to or subtracted from a monster or NPC also adds to or subtracts from initiative.

HH Page 288, GMG Pages 470-471, 486

How does the rule for “drawing weapons” work? How do sheathing, ungripping, gripping, bows, and implements work? Very little is explained here.

How We Handled It at Our Table

“Drawing weapons” is stated to be a quick action; this rule is vague, and does not cover sheathing, ungripping, gripping, bows, or implements. In this game, drawing one or two weapons is a quick action (so as to better support rogues and two-weapon rangers). Sheathing one or two weapons is a free action. Ungripping one hand from a two-handed weapon is a free action. Regripping a two-handed weapon into both hands is a quick action. Shields, symbols (which “love to be brandished in battle”), and wands are considered one-handed weapons for all wielding and gripping purposes. Bows and staves are considered two-handed weapons for all wielding and gripping purposes. The standard action necessary to use a potion, and the quick action necessary to use a rune, include the entire process of sheathing, drawing, and redrawing all necessary items, leaving the character gripping exactly what they were wielding immediately beforehand. (Yes, this is a very bulky piece of “homebrew,” but the rules really are that ambiguous.)

GMG Page 471

When a rune gives a random energy type, who chooses? Does the damage fully overrides all other damage types used through the weapon or implement?

How We Handled It at Our Table

When a rune gives a random energy type, the player chooses, and it fully overrides all other damage types used through the weapon or implement?

GMG Pages 499-501

I do not understand the point of these information-gathering scenes. If accessing one of these scenes requires an icon connection, and the payoff is along the lines of a +5 bonus to the skill check to find the dungeon... then what is the point? An icon connection could be spend to automatically find the dungeon with no skill check **anyway**.

GMG Page 503

Does a mastermind alerted by an icon connection twist actually do anything?

GMG Page 505

What is the *talisman of entrenchment*? It is nowhere in the GMG.

GMG Page 510

The food scene is very confusingly worded. I think it could use another editing pass. For example, if people are eating the food simultaneously, how are "each hero that has previously downed a food item" and "each food item that any hero has eaten previously" tracked?

HH Page 44, GMG Page 519-520, HH Page 90

How is average damage actually calculated? How does the Strength domain champion-tier feat figure into this?

How We Handled It at Our Table

All dice in a damage roll are averaged and added up, including decimals, and then finally averaged. Damage is **never** rolled unless an effect specifically stipulates that it must be rolled. This average can then be doubled by, for example, critical hits. Whenever such average damage would be halved, it always rounds up. An unusual exception comes from the Strength domain champion-tier feat, which specifically states that if average damage is taken, each d12 counts as a 7; this overrides the usual calculation of average damage.

HH Page 291, GMG Page 526

I genuinely do not understand how the "in a group" rule is supposed to work. I think that some examples could clarify the matter.

How We Handled It at Our Table

"In a group" is very ambiguous. In this game, "in a group" simply means that once the first target is chosen, the second target must be whichever valid target is closest to the first, the third target must be whichever valid target is second-closest to the first, the fourth target must be whichever valid target is third-closest to the first, and so on. The user of the power or spell breaks any ties. In other words, "in a group" does **not** allow the GM to veto a target on the grounds that they are insufficiently clustered up with other targets; "in a group" simply prevents skipping over valid targets.

HH Page 304, GMG Page 533-534

Does vulnerability apply on a natural 1, given that the HH and the glossary disagree on the subject? Does it apply even if the attack deals no damage? Is it doubled on a critical hit? Does it affect ongoing damage?

How We Handled It at Our Table

Vulnerability applies on a natural 1, it applies even if the attack deals no damage, and it is doubled on a critical hit. However, vulnerability does **not** affect ongoing damage.