



OSR Spell Survey

A Troy Press Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The goal of this survey is to provide feedback to the OSR (Old School Renaissance) and RPG community on what Level 1-3 spells are considered most useful. The results can then be used to create shorter spell lists and player aids - or to inspire custom spell lists for other designs.

Spell descriptions take the form of “Name [120', 2] Effect” showing “[range in feet, duration in turns]” before the magical effect. Spell descriptions © Zenopus Archives, <http://zenopusarchives.blogspot.com>. Used by permission.

The results in this report are from an online survey of 61 members of the OSR subreddit. The survey was fielded from November 10, 2019, through June 1, 2020.

Ranking Summary

“For each of the six groups of spells, please rank at least the top three spells for play, from most useful to least useful. The spells are presented in random order to minimize order bias (the likelihood of spells listed first being given a better ranking).”

Level 1 Magic-User Spells? Ranked #1 Sleep, #2 Charm Person, #3 Detect Magic.

Level 2 Magic-User Spells? Ranked #1 Invisibility, #2 Web, #3 Knock.

Level 3 Magic-User Spells? Ranked #1 Haste, #2 Fire Ball, #3 Fly.

Level 1 Cleric Spells? Ranked #1 Cure Light Wounds, #2 Protection from Evil, #3 Light.

Level 2 Cleric Spells? Ranked #1 Hold Person, #2 Bless, #3 Silence.

Level 3 Cleric Spells? Ranked #1 Remove Curse, #2 Cure Disease, #3 Animate Dead.

Results Summary

What problems do you perceive with Old School D&D magic? Doesn't suit certain settings and types of campaigns (59%); Vancian magic isn't magical enough (34%); Set, static spell lists (31%).

What types of spell systems do you prefer in your RPGs? New spells are discovered in game (80%), Spells by spell level (40%), Level-less spells (37%).

What do you prefer for availability of spells? Casting has a cost (63%), Has cost in mana (37%), Spell slots (37%).

How do you prefer to determine success of spells? Target (if any) gets a saving throw (71%), Caster failure results in anything from magical side effects to catastrophes (46%), Caster rolls for success (39%).

Which, if any, of the following RPGs do you play? Dungeons & Dragons (64%), Dungeons & Dragons B/X (57%), Dungeons & Dragons 5e (54%).

When did you first start playing role-playing games? 200Xs (32%), 2010s (18%).

DETAILED RESULTS

Level 1 Magic-User Spells

	Overall Rank	#1	#2	#3	#4-#14	Unranked
Sleep [240', 4d4] Sleeps 2d8 creatures of 1HD, 2d6 of 2HD, 1d6 of 3HD or 1 of 4HD, no save!	1	53%	25%	9%	7%	5%
Charm Person [120', variable] Charms 1 humanoid, unless a Save is made. Time until new save is based on INT 1 day if 18+ INT, 2d if 16-17, 7d if 12-15, 14d if 10-11, 21d if 7-9, 28d if 3-6	2	9%	35%	13%	20%	24%
Detect Magic [60', 2] Caster can detect magic in any person, place or object in range	3	7%	7%	11%	31%	44%
Shield [0', 2] Caster is protected with AC2 vs missiles, AC4 vs other attacks	4	2%	5%	7%	42%	44%
Light [120', 6+lvl] Lights a 15' radius equal to a torch for the duration, caster can end earlier	5	2%	9%	7%	33%	49%
Read Magic [0', 2] Caster to read and understand a scroll for future use	6	11%	4%	7%	29%	49%
Magic Missile [150'] Fires 1 magic arrow (+1 hit/damage) per 5 levels with a range as long bow	7	7%	2%	15%	24%	53%
Hold Portal [10', 2d6] Locks a single door, gate or other portal for the duration	8	0%	0%	13%	36%	51%
Enlargement [30', 1+lvl] Increases size of living target by ×1.5, or non-living ×2, to a max of 12 cubic ft/lvl	9	2%	7%	4%	27%	60%
Tenser's Floating Disc [10', 6] Creates a disc that carries up to 500 lbs (5000 gp) & follows 6' behind caster	10	5%	0%	7%	33%	55%
Protection from Evil [0', 6] Caster gains +1 Saves, -1 AC vs evil attackers, & immunity to enchanted monsters	11	2%	4%	0%	35%	60%
Read Languages [0', 2] Caster can decipher any language or code	12	0%	2%	2%	38%	58%
Dancing Lights [120', 2] Creates 1-6 lights equal to floating lanterns under control of caster's voice	13	0%	0%	4%	36%	60%
Ventriloquism [60', 2] Caster can project voice from any object or creature in range	14	0%	0%	0%	29%	71%

Level 2 Magic-User Spells

	Overall Rank	#1	#2	#3	#4-#18	Unranked
Invisibility [240', ∞] Turns a creature or item invisible, ends if the creature makes an attack	1	39%	32%	12%	12%	5%
Web [10', 48] 10'×10'×20' web, normal man 2d4 turns to free, giant 2 rounds, fire 1 round	2	17%	12%	15%	20%	37%
Knock [60'] Unlocks a locked or barred door, gate or chest	3	15%	10%	10%	20%	46%
ESP [60', 12] Caster can detect the thoughts of creatures in range, thru 2' rock but not lead	4	12%	12%	2%	29%	44%
Levitate [20'×lvl, 6+lvl] Target can move upward at 60'/turn	5	5%	5%	15%	27%	49%
Mirror Image [0', 6] Creates 1d4 (roll) mimicking duplicates of the caster that each last until hit	6	0%	10%	12%	22%	56%
Continual Light [120', ∞] Lights a 30' radius that lasts until dispelled	7	5%	2%	0%	39%	54%
Phantasmal Forces [120', ∞] Creates a silent illusion that lasts until touched or the caster is disturbed	8	5%	5%	5%	29%	56%
Locate Object [60'+lvl, 2] Tells the caster with the direction of a well-known object within range	9	0%	0%	10%	32%	59%
Darkness [120', 6] Darkness in 50' radius, prevents all vision, ended by Light or Dispel Magic	10	2%	0%	2%	32%	63%
Strength [0', 48] Target gains strength by class	11	0%	7%	7%	15%	71%
Ray of Enfeeblement [30', lvl] Target must Save or lose 4 points strength & do 1/4 less damage	12	0%	2%	2%	27%	68%
Detect Invisible [10'×lvl, 6] Caster can see any invisible person or object in range	13	0%	0%	5%	20%	76%
Detect Evil [60', 2] Caster can detect evil in any person or object in range	14	0%	0%	0%	27%	73%
Wizard Lock [10', ∞] As Hold Portal but permanent, can be passed by Knock or MU 3 levels higher	15	0%	0%	0%	27%	73%
Pyrotechnics [240', 6] Turns a fire into a fireworks display or thick smoke covering a 30' radius	16	0%	2%	0%	24%	73%
Audible Glamer [240', 2] Creates sounds equivalent to up to 8 people per two levels	17	0%	0%	2%	22%	76%
Magic Mouth [0', ∞] Creates a magical mouth that speaks up to 25 words when triggered	18	0%	0%	0%	20%	80%

Level 3 Magic-User Spells

	Overall Rank	#1	#2	#3	#4-#18	Unranked
Haste [240', 3] Up to 24 creatures double their move & attack twice, at beginning & end of round	1	8%	22%	19%	24%	27%
Fire Ball [240'] Burns all in a 20' radius of blast for 1d6 x level hp; Save vs Spells for 1/2	2	30%	8%	14%	16%	32%
Fly [0', d6+lvl] Caster can fly at 120'/turn (DM rolls secretly for duration)	3	11%	19%	19%	27%	24%
Dispel Magic [120', 1] Disrupts spells in 15' radius, % chance = level of caster / level of other caster	4	11%	11%	14%	38%	27%
Hold Person [120', 6+lvl] Save vs Spells or paralyzed, up to 4 targets, if only 1 save is at -2	5	16%	8%	3%	30%	43%
Lightning Bolt [240'] Zaps all in 60' long, 7.5' wide path for 1d6 x level hp; Save vs Spells for 1/2	6	3%	14%	5%	22%	57%
Suggestion [60', 1 week] Target must save vs spells or carry out an order of up to two sentences	7	8%	3%	5%	30%	54%
Invisibility 10' [240', ∞] As per Invisibility, but affects all within a 10' radius	8	3%	8%	0%	24%	65%
Monster Summoning I [10', 6] Summons 1st level monsters to fight for caster, 1d6 if <1 HD, 1d3 if ≥1 HD	9	5%	3%	8%	19%	65%
Clairvoyance [60', 6] Caster can see in range, through doors or 2' rock but not lead	10	0%	3%	5%	27%	65%
Slow [240', 3] Up to 24 creatures halve their move & attack once every other round	11	0%	3%	3%	22%	73%
Rope Trick [0', 6+lvl] Creates a secure space at end of a rope from 6-24' long for up to 4 persons	12	3%	0%	3%	27%	68%
Explosive Runes [0', ∞] Does 4d6 hp & destroys item, MU 2 levels higher can detect/remove	13	0%	0%	0%	30%	70%
Clairaudience [60', 6] Caster can hear in range, through doors or 2' rock but not lead	14	0%	0%	0%	27%	73%
Protection/Normal Missile [30', 12] Target immune to non-magical missiles, except from creatures with >1HD	15	0%	0%	3%	24%	73%
Protection/Evil 10' [0', 12] As per Protection from Evil, but affects all in a 10' radius and duration is double	16	0%	0%	0%	24%	76%
Water Breathing [0', 12] One person (caster or other) can breathe underwater, no aid to swimming	17	0%	0%	0%	30%	70%
Infravision [0', 1 day] Target can see in the dark as an elf or dwarf with a 60' range	18	3%	0%	0%	22%	76%

Level 1 Cleric Spells

	Overall Rank	#1	#2	#3	#4-#8	Unranked
Cure Light Wounds [0'] Heals 1d6+1 hp in one person {Cause Light Wounds}	1	87%	7%	7%	0%	0%
Protection from Evil [0', 12] Caster: +1 Saves, -1 AC vs evil, immunity to enchanted monster {Protection from Good}	2	7%	23%	17%	27%	27%
Light [120', 12] 15' radius equal to torch for duration, caster can end early {Darkness}	3	3%	30%	20%	10%	37%
Detect Magic [60', 2] Caster can detect magic in any person, place or object	4	0%	20%	23%	27%	30%
Purify Food/Water [120', 6+lvl] Restores poisoned food & drink for up to 12 people {Contaminate Food/Water}	5	3%	13%	7%	33%	43%
Detect Evil [120', 6] Caster can detect evil in any person or object in range {Detect Good}	6	0%	7%	7%	30%	57%
Remove Fear [0'] Target gets new Save vs Fear at +1 per caster level {Cause Fear}	7	0%	0%	10%	30%	60%
Resist Cold [30', 6] Target gains +2 Saves & -1 damage/die against cold	8	0%	0%	7%	23%	70%

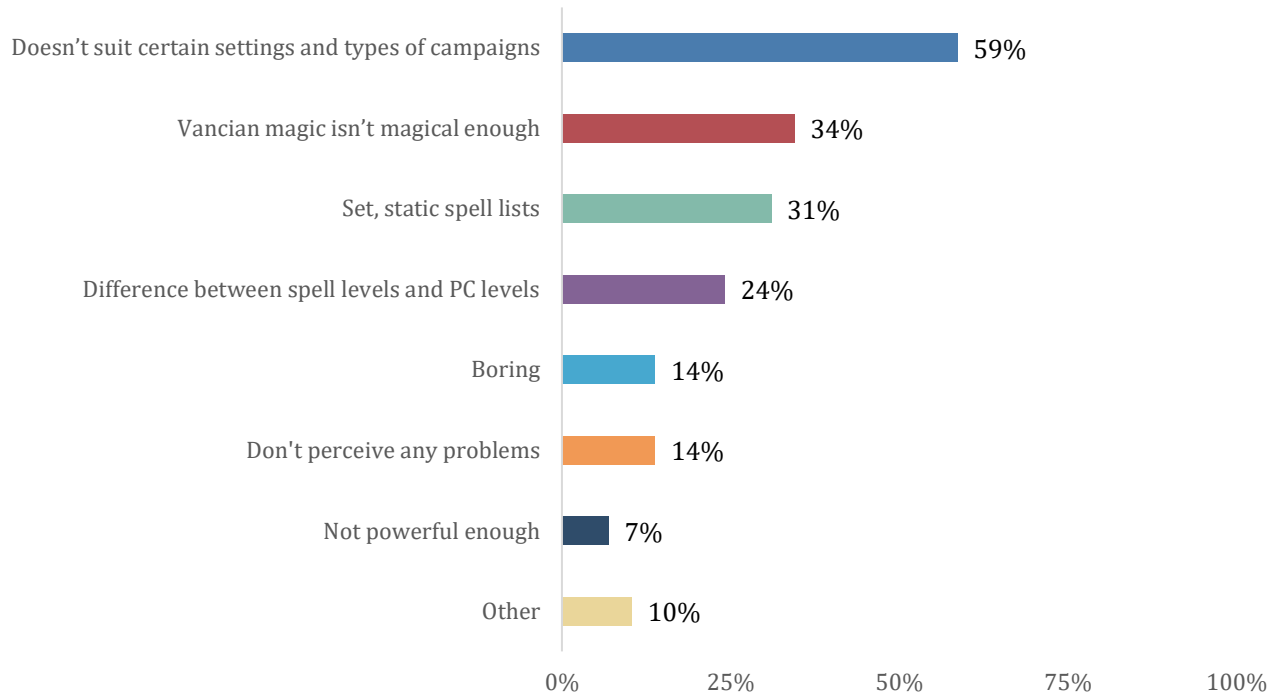
Level 2 Cleric Spells

	Overall Rank	#1	#2	#3	#4-#8	Unranked
Hold Person [120', 6+lvl] Save or Paralyzed, up to 4 targets, -2 Save if only 1 target	1	59%	14%	10%	7%	10%
Bless [60', 6] Group gains +1 to hit, must be cast before combat {Curse}	2	24%	21%	21%	10%	24%
Silence, 15' Radius [180', 12] Prevents all noise in area of effect, including casting	3	14%	17%	14%	24%	31%
Find Traps [30', 2] Locates mechanical or magical traps in range	4	0%	24%	21%	21%	34%
Speak with Animals [30', 6] Talk to normal animals, keep from attacking, may aid caster	5	0%	10%	17%	28%	45%
Know Alignment [10', 2] Caster learns alignment of creatures in range	6	0%	10%	3%	34%	52%
Snake Charm [60', 1d4+1] Charms 1 HD/level, only lasts 1d6+6 rounds in melee	7	3%	0%	7%	31%	59%
Resist Fire [30', 6] Target gains +2 Saves & -1 damage/die against fire	8	0%	0%	0%	31%	69%

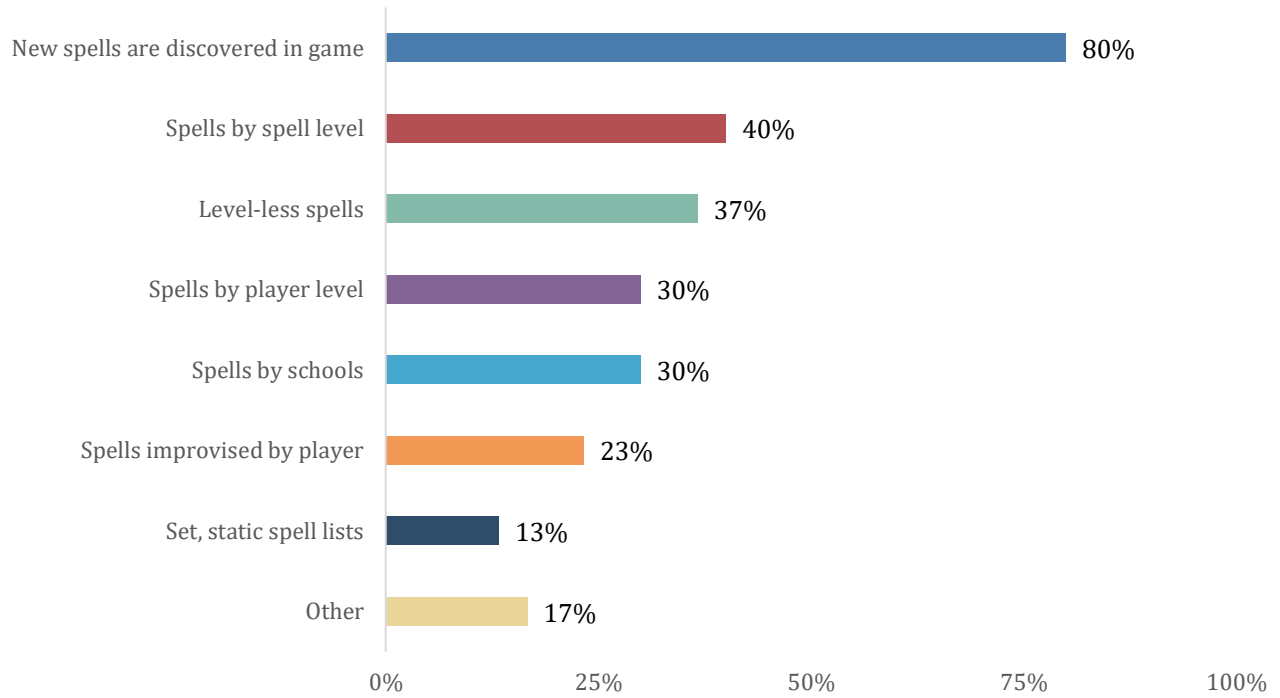
Level 3 Cleric Spells

	Overall Rank	#1	#2	#3	#4-#8	Unranked
Remove Curse [0', ∞] Removes a curse on one person or object	1	28%	28%	14%	21%	10%
Cure Disease [0'] Removes disease from one person {Cause Disease}	2	17%	17%	17%	21%	28%
Animate Dead [10', ∞] Creates 1 skeleton or zombie per level, controlled by cleric	3	7%	17%	21%	21%	34%
Speak with Dead [0'] Ask three questions of a corpse 1-4 days old	4	21%	10%	10%	17%	41%
Continual Light [120', ∞] Full daylight in 120' radius, lasts until dispelled {Continual Darkness}	5	3%	10%	24%	24%	38%
Prayer [30', 1] All in 20' square Save at -1, plus -1 per 10 levels of caster	6	21%	7%	3%	21%	48%
Locate Object [90', 2] Provides direction of well-known object, add 10 feet/level	7	3%	3%	10%	31%	52%
Glyph of Warding [0', ∞] Protects 5' square/level, 2 hp damage/level, Save for 1/2 Level	8	0%	7%	0%	31%	62%

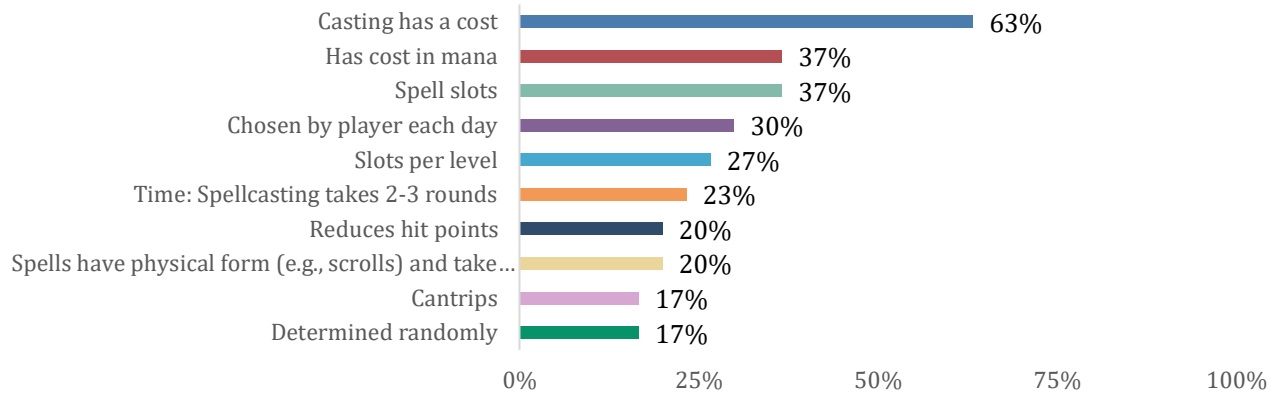
What problems do you perceive with Old School D&D magic?



What types of spell systems do you prefer in your RPGs?



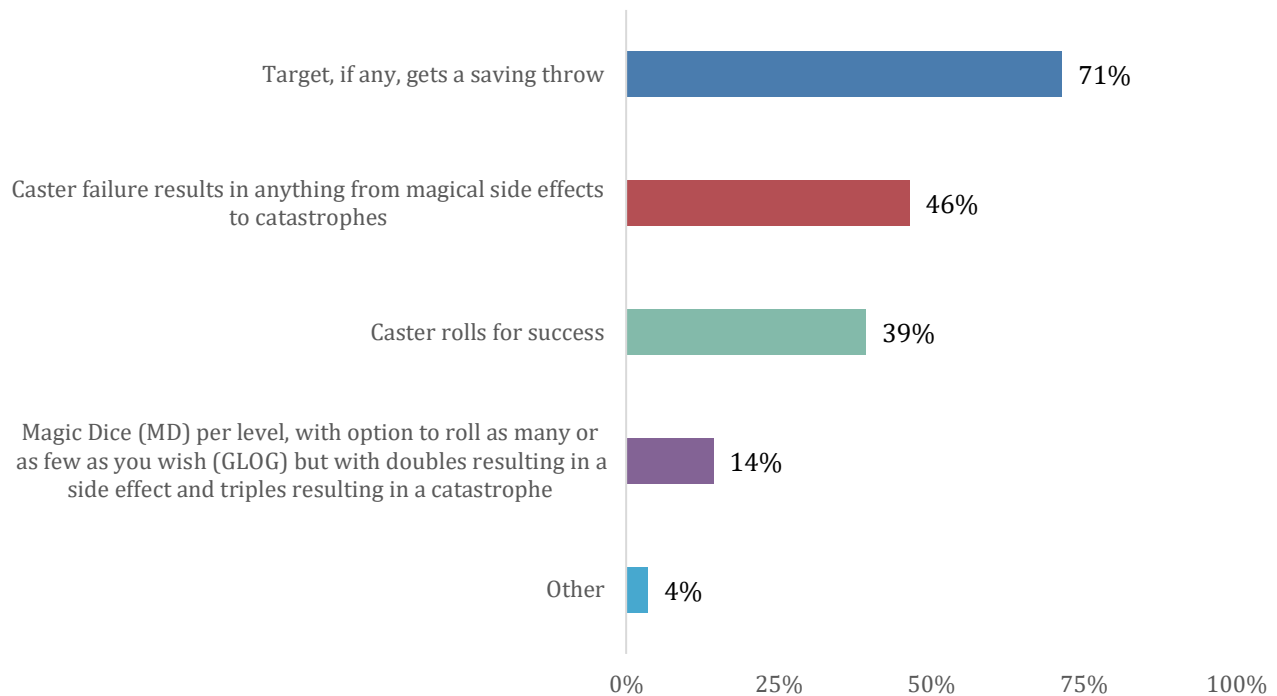
What do you prefer for availability of spells? - Top 10



Option	Rank	Response %
Casting has a cost	1	63%
Has cost in mana	2	37%
Spell slots	2	37%
Chosen by player each day	4	30%
Slots per level	5	27%
Time: Spellcasting takes 2-3 rounds	6	23%
Reduces hit points	7	20%
Spells have physical form (e.g., scrolls) and take encumbrance slots	7	20%
Cantrips	9	17%
Determined randomly	9	17%
Overall number of slots	9	17%
Any spell caster knows	12	10%
Chosen by player if they pass a check	13	3%
Other	14	7%

Note: Respondents could select multiple options

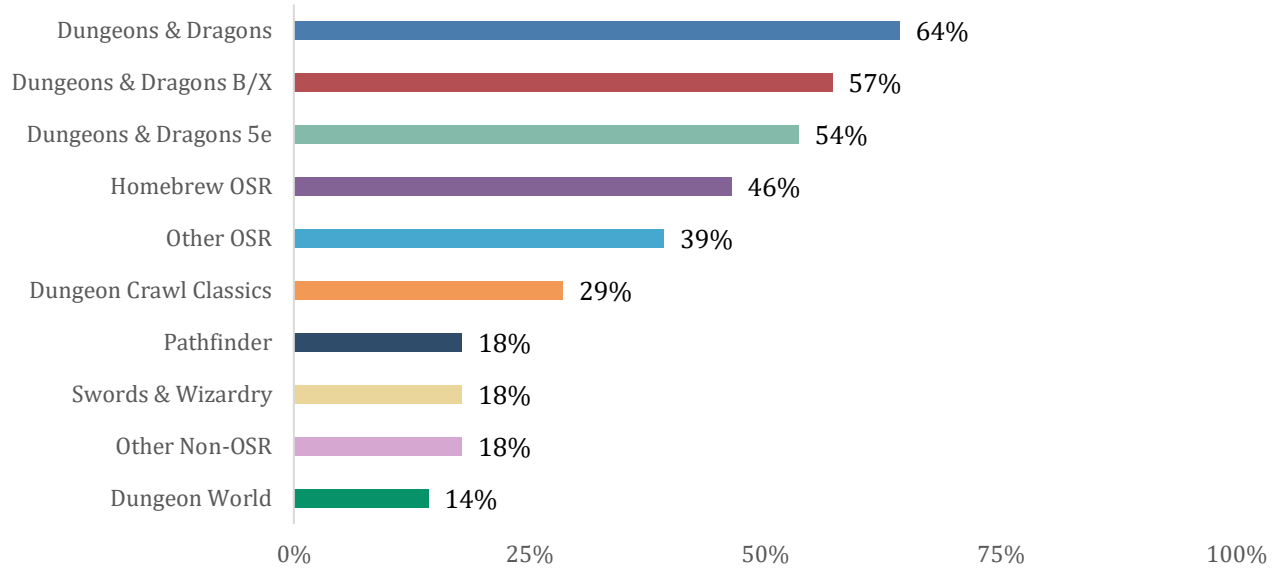
How do you prefer to determine success of spells?



(Optional.) We welcome any other anonymous comments that you would like to share about spell systems.

- "I've never seen old school D&D magic as being broken. I think with the right mindset, a player can make it work very well."
- "Flexibility and agency are the fundamental components to making a spell system feel useful and interesting as a player choice."
- "Currently experimenting with 'all dice rolled for spells explode on max result.' I use abstract distances, so a fireball might affect 1d6 nearby targets instead of striking 20ft. Radius. If more targets rolled than enemies, allies caught in blast so 'big spells' always dangerous."
- "As a designer, I think spell slots invite opportunity for good game balance. But as a player, I consider it limiting and too static. It's fun to have limits until your teammates start dying because you picked the wrong spell at level 3. I'd like to see a system pull off category-type magic. As in, you invest in Pyromancy and that gives you a number of fire-type spells you can use (that may or may not be obsolete due to similar spells you already know)."

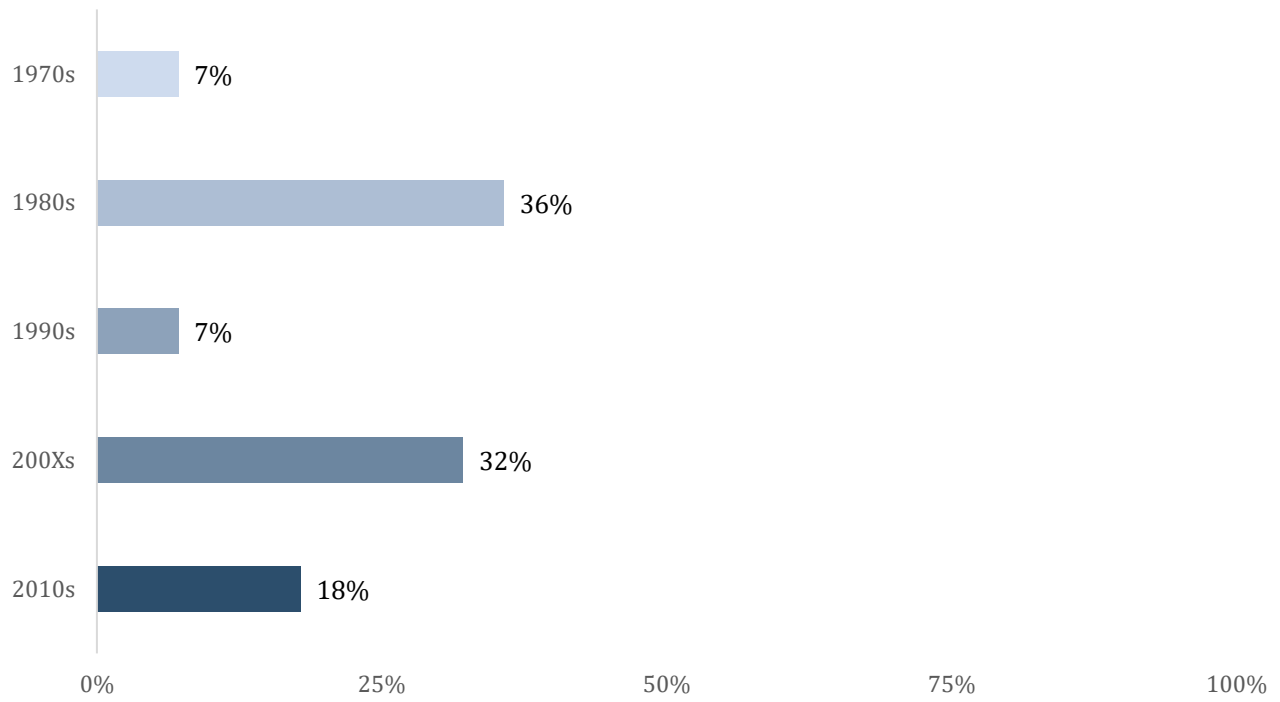
Which, if any, of the following RPGs do you play? - Top 10



Option	Rank	Response %
Dungeons & Dragons	1	64%
Dungeons & Dragons B/X	2	57%
Dungeons & Dragons 5e	3	54%
Homebrew OSR	4	46%
Other OSR	5	39%
Dungeon Crawl Classics	6	29%
Pathfinder	7	18%
Swords & Wizardry	7	18%
Other Non-OSR	7	18%
Dungeon World	10	14%
Labyrinth Lord	10	14%
Homebrew Non-OSR	12	7%

Note: Respondents could select multiple options

When did you first start playing role-playing games?



When did you first start playing role-playing games?

Option	Response %	Cumulative %
1970s	7%	100%
1980s	36%	93%
1990s	7%	57%
2000s	32%	50%
2010s	18%	18%

Note: Total does not add up to 100% due to rounding.

APPENDIX - METHODOLOGY

This online survey had 61 respondents. It was fielded first on November 10, 2019 and most recently on June 1, 2020. The survey results were not weighted.

Respondents were recruited from social media postings to the OSR subreddit and on Twitter.

As this was not a probability-based sample, calculating the theoretical margin of sampling error is not applicable. Given the very low sample size, these survey results should be considered qualitative or directional in nature. They cannot be used to precisely predict the percent of the studied population that share attitudes and behaviors with the respondents. To accomplish that, with at least a margin of plus or minus 10%, we would need to survey 87 or more respondents selected at random from the target population.