

A QUICK PRIMER FOR CRESTHAVEN RPG

By Alan Bollinger



WELCOME, ADVENTURER

Don't worry about memorizing rules. Just describe what you want to do and we'll see what happens. This primer will show you how Cresthaven works, but the real learning happens at the table. Jump in, take risks, and let the story unfold.

FOREWORD

Cresthaven stands on the shoulders of the early dreamers who built this hobby. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson showed that imagination could have rules. Ed Greenwood gave it life and world. Tom Moldvay, Frank Mentzer, and David Cook made it easy to share. Matthew J. Finch later captured their spirit in *A Quick Primer for Old School Gaming*, reminding us that rulings, creativity, and courage matter more than rules.

Cresthaven carries that spark forward with a simple, modern d20 system built on fast play and real consequences.

For me, it started as a way to share my childhood RPG experiences with my own children and to build something open and free from corporate control. Cresthaven lives on the open web, where anyone can create, share, and make the world their own.

If you are new to this kind of play, this primer will show you the basics. But the real magic begins when you sit down, start rolling, and see what happens next.

Welcome to Cresthaven RPG one and all!

- Alan

HOW CRESTHAVEN WORKS: THE BASICS

Cresthaven uses standard polyhedral dice (d4, d6, d8, d10, d12, d20). When you attempt an action with an uncertain outcome, you roll a d20, add your relevant ability modifier (ranging from -3 to +3), add any applicable skill bonuses, and compare the result to a Difficulty Check or DC (the target number you must meet or beat) set by the DM. Meet or exceed the DC and you succeed. A natural 20 always succeeds. The DM may grant advantage (roll two d20s, take the higher) for favorable circumstances or good planning, or disadvantage (roll two d20s, take the lower) for poor conditions. Combat uses the same d20 mechanic for attacks, while damage is rolled using the weapon's damage die.

Your Actions Drive the Story: When it's your turn, you describe what you want to do. Want to search for hidden treasure? Negotiate with a merchant? Fight a monster? You declare your action, the DM determines if a roll is needed, and the dice show how well you succeed. A high roll might mean you find a valuable clue or land a devastating blow. A low roll might lead to complications or failure. The DM adjudicates results and guides you through the consequences. Cresthaven is about action, not permission.

Player Tip: Describe your intent first; dice come later.

Clues Lead to Choices: During your adventure, you'll discover clues, meet interesting characters, and uncover secrets. These hints help you decide what to do next. Should you explore the dark corridor or check the tavern for information? Trust the suspicious merchant or investigate further? The direction of the story is up to you and your group's choices. There's no predetermined

path, just opportunities and consequences.

Create Your Character: Character creation takes 15-20 minutes. Choose your ancestry, class, ability scores, and equipment. That's it. No elaborate backstories, no hours of optimization, no detailed histories about your orphaned noble or exiled prince. You'll be making another character soon anyway when this one dies. The stories that matter emerge from actual play at the table, not from pages of backstory no one reads. Pre-generated characters are available if you want to jump straight into the action.

THE SIX LAWS OF ADVENTURING

Playing Cresthaven is very different from modern games where rules cover many specific situations. The Cresthaven rules don't give you exhaustive guidance, and that's intentional. Treat it like an adventure where the rules provide guidelines and the DM interprets those guidelines. This is collaborative storytelling with dice, not a tactical miniatures game.

FIRST LAW: RULINGS OVER RULES

The world answers faster than the rulebook.

In Cresthaven, you don't look up a rule for every situation. You make a ruling in the moment. The players describe what they want to do without checking their character sheet for permission. The DM uses common sense, decides what happens, or assigns a difficulty check if there's uncertainty. Then the game moves forward.

This is why character sheets are so simple. Many actions that require specific skill checks in modern games are handled through description, thinking, and experimentation in Cresthaven. Getting past obstacles is more hands-on than you're used to. Rules are a resource for the DM, not a restriction on players. Players use observation and description as their primary tools.

Mechanical Anchor: When a player declares an action, the DM decides: (1) Is it possible? (2) Does it need a roll? (3) What ability score applies? Then play continues.

DM Tip: If players surprise you with an action, let the story breathe before ruling. Consider consequences, not just success or failure.

EXAMPLE: THE LOCKED DOOR

Modern Style:

- Player: "I try to pick the lock."
- DM: "Roll your Lockpicking check."
- Player: "I got a 16, plus my +5 bonus is 21."

- DM: "You successfully pick the lock."

Cresthaven Style:

- Fighter: "I listen at the door first. Do I hear anything?"
- DM: "Make a Wisdom check."
- Fighter: "I rolled a 9, plus my +1 Wisdom is 10."
- DM: "You hear faint shuffling sounds, but nothing threatening."
- Thief: "I examine the lock and check for traps around the keyhole."
- DM: "Good thinking. Roll a Search check."
- Thief: "I have the Search skill, so that's a 12 on the die, plus my +3 Wisdom, plus +5 for Search skill. That's 20 total."
- DM: "You don't see any traps. The lock is old iron, looks like a DC 15."
- Thief: "I pull out my thieves' tools and carefully work the tumblers."
- DM: "Roll a Dexterity check. You have advantage because of your lockpicking tools."
- Thief: "I rolled a 10 and a 16, taking the 16, plus my +2 Dexterity, plus my skill bonus makes it well over the DC."
- DM: "You feel the tumblers align, and with a satisfying click, the lock opens."
- Fighter: "Great! I'll slowly push the door open, shield ready."

ALTERNATIVE CRESTHAVEN APPROACHES:

The party could have solved this problem many different ways:

- **Brute Force:** The Fighter declares "I throw my shoulder into the door and try to force it open." The DM calls for a Strength check. Success breaks the door but makes a lot of noise.
- **Axe to Wood:** The Barbarian says "I'm not waiting. I chop through the door with my axe." No check needed, but it takes time, makes tremendous noise, and destroys the door (eliminating it as cover or a barrier later).
- **Magical Solution:** The Wizard offers "I cast Knock to magically unlock it." Spell succeeds automatically but uses a spell slot and makes a loud knocking sound.

- **Creative Thinking:** Someone might check if the door is actually locked, look for another entrance, or try to slip something under the door to see what's inside first.
- **Poor Choices:** A player might say "I shoot a fire arrow at the lock to melt it" or "I pour acid on the hinges." The DM adjudicates the consequences, which might work brilliantly or backfire spectacularly.

The solution is really up to the players' imagination, for better or worse. The DM's job is to adjudicate what happens based on what the players describe, not to present a menu of approved options. ***This is why a clever player is often more valuable than a mechanically strong character. A Fighter with average stats who thinks tactically, asks good questions, and uses the environment creatively will outperform an optimized character played without imagination.***

Notice the difference? In Crethaven, players actively describe what their characters are doing first. The DM then decides if rolls are even needed and what those rolls should be. This approach opens up all actions to any player, regardless of class. Anyone can try to pick a lock, listen at a door, or search for traps. However, having the right class for the situation provides significant advantages through specialized skills and better ability scores. The Thief's Search skill gave them a much better chance of spotting traps, and their lockpicking expertise made opening the door far more likely to succeed. This naturally encourages diverse party compositions where each character brings unique strengths to different challenges, without preventing creative problem-solving from players whose characters lack specialized training.

SECOND LAW: ACTIONS OVER SKILLS

Description precedes dice.

Crethaven doesn't have an extensive skill list like modern games. A few character classes have specialized skills (for example, Thieves have Climb and Search skills), but these apply only in narrow, specific circumstances. For everything else, players describe what their characters do, and the DM assigns a difficulty check based on the action and the character's relevant ability scores. Anyone can try anything.

You don't need a "Intimidation" skill to threaten a goblin. You describe how you're intimidating it. You don't need an "Acrobatics" skill to swing from a chandelier. You declare your intent, the DM assesses the difficulty, and you roll.

The DM's job is helping players use their ability bonuses (Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, Charisma) to enhance their actions. A strong

Fighter might force open a stuck door. A wise Cleric might sense evil. A charismatic character might charm a guard. The same action attempted by different characters uses different abilities and has different chances of success.

Mechanical Anchor: Base roll = d20 + Ability Modifier + Skill Bonus (if applicable) vs DC. Advantage/disadvantage applies based on circumstances, equipment, or clever ideas.

Player Tip: Don't ask "Can I do this?" Just say what you're doing. The DM will tell you if it's possible and what to roll.

EXAMPLE: THE SUSPICIOUS GUARD

Modern Style:

- Player: "Can I bluff past the guard?"
- DM: "Sure, roll Deception."
- Player: "I have Deception +6. I rolled 17, so 23 total."
- DM: "The guard's Insight is +3. Roll opposed checks."
- DM: "The guard rolled 14. You successfully deceive him."

Crethaven Style:

- Player: "I approach the guard with confidence and flash a stolen seal I found earlier. 'Official business from the magistrate. Let me through.'"
- DM: "Interesting approach. The guard looks skeptical. Give me a Charisma check."
- Player: "I rolled an 11, plus my Charisma bonus of +1 makes it 12."
- DM: "The guard squints at the seal, clearly uncertain. He's not convinced, but he's hesitating."
- Player: "I lean in and whisper urgently, 'There's been a breach in the lower district. Every moment counts.'"
- DM: "That's good thinking. Roll again, this time with advantage for your creative approach."
- Player: "Natural 20!"
- DM: "Natural 20 is an automatic success! The guard's eyes widen. 'Gods above, go quickly!' He practically shoves you through the gate."

Notice how the Crethaven player never asked "Can I?" They declared their action and described their approach. The DM then determined what happened based on that description.

THIRD LAW: HEROIC, NOT SUPERHERO

Small beginnings, legendary endings.

Old-style games have a human-sized scale, not a super-powered scale. At first level, adventurers are barely more capable than a regular person. They live by their wits. Even as characters rise to the heights of power, they aren't picking up super-abilities or astronomical ability scores. Truly high-level characters have precious items accumulated over a career of adventuring; they usually have some measure of political power, at least a stronghold. They are deadly when facing normal opponents, but they aren't invincible.

Old school gaming is the fantasy of taking a guy without tremendous powers, a guy much like yourself but somewhat stronger, or with slight magic powers, and becoming a king or a feared sorcerer over time. It's not about a guy who can, at the start of the game, take on ten club-wielding peasants at once. It's got a real-world, gritty starting point. And your character isn't personally ever going to become stronger than a dragon. At higher levels, he may be able to kill a dragon with his sword or with spells, but never by grabbing its throat and strangling it in a one-on-one test of strength.

To make a comic-book analogy, characters don't become Superman; they become Batman. And they don't start as Batman, Batman is the pinnacle. He's a bit faster than normal, a bit stronger than normal, he's got a lot of cash, a Bat Cave, a butler, a henchman (Robin) and cool gadgets. But he can't leap tall buildings in a single bound.

If you don't get a feeling of achievement with Batman instead of Superman as the goal, the old school gaming style probably isn't right for your vision of what makes good and exciting fantasy. Old school gaming is about the triumph of the little guy into an epic hero, not the development of an epic hero into a superhuman being.

Mechanical Anchor: Ability scores range from -3 to +3. High-level characters gain better equipment, followers, and strongholds, not superhuman stats. Power comes from accumulation and reputation, not personal invincibility.

Build the character you want to play. In Crethaven, you have a limited pool of points to distribute among your ability scores. Sometimes you'll want to go negative in one ability to boost another. The trade-offs are yours to make. Want a weak Fighter who relies on tactics instead of brute strength? A brilliant but frail Wizard? A charismatic Thief who talks their way out of trouble? Build them.

Ancestry matters too. You can choose exotic ancestries like elves or dwarves for special bonuses and unique abilities, but humans always have the statistical advantage in raw ability scores. It's a trade-off: interesting special abilities versus stronger baseline

stats. The focus isn't on perfectly balanced stat arrays. It's about creating the character concept you're excited to play.

Yes, this means some characters might be mechanically stronger than others at the table. That's okay. The game isn't about perfectly balanced party composition. It's about interesting characters navigating a dangerous world together. A "weaker" character played with skill and creativity can be just as effective, and perhaps more memorable, than a statistically optimized one. The focus is on the character you want to roleplay, not the character that wins on paper.

DM Tip: Reward clever play over strong stats. Give players chances to use their weaknesses creatively.

Know when to run. A good GM is impartial: he doesn't favor the party, and he doesn't favor the monsters. But he's not playing a tournament against the players, where he's restricted by rules and required to offer up well-gauged, well-balanced challenges. Instead, he's there to be an impartial referee for the characters' adventures in a fantasy world, NOT in a "game setting." Even on the first level of a dungeon, there might be challenges too difficult for a first-level party of adventurers. Ask the one-armed guy in the tavern; he may know. If you didn't think of checking the tavern for one-armed men, consider it a comment on your skill as a player.

FOURTH LAW: PLAYER AGENCY OVER BALANCE

Choose your path; accept the consequences.

Crethaven is set in a living world, not a balanced game setting. The party has no "right" to encounter only monsters they can defeat. They have no "right" to find treasure appropriate to their level. They have no "right" to invoke specific rules. They have no "right" to a die roll in every situation.

Game balance is not a priority. What matters is player choice. The DM creates situations, describes the world, and adjudicates outcomes. The players decide what their characters do. Sometimes those decisions lead to triumph. Sometimes they lead to disaster. That's the game.

This doesn't mean the DM is adversarial. The DM isn't trying to kill the party. But the DM isn't protecting them either. The DM is neutral, a referee presenting a dangerous world. The players must use their wits to navigate it.

The world is unfair in both directions. You might encounter a dragon on the first level of a dungeon and need to flee for your lives. You might also stumble upon a magical sword that grants you incredible power, far beyond what your level "should" have. But it's a dangerous world. Thieves are common. Pixies play

tricks. Things go missing all the time. That overpowered treasure you found? Someone or something might try to take it from you. Nothing is guaranteed, and nothing is safe.

Mechanical Anchor: The DM doesn't scale encounters to party level. Challenges exist as the world dictates. Players must gather information, plan, and sometimes retreat.

Critical Rule on Player Agency: Players should never ask "Can I do X?" Instead, they declare what they're attempting: "I climb the wall," "I pick the lock," "I intimidate the guard." The DM then determines if the action is possible and what happens. This is crucial. Asking permission breaks the flow and limits creativity. Declaring action keeps the game moving and opens possibilities.

The DM's Boundary: While the DM has significant power to shape the world and adjudicate rules, the DM never tells players what their characters do (except under magical compulsion like charm spells). The players control their characters. Period. If the DM starts dictating character actions, the game becomes one person telling a story while others roll dice. That's not Cresthaven. That's not fun.

Player Tip: If something seems too dangerous, it probably is. Gather information, hire help, or come back later with better equipment.

THE LIVING DUNGEON

The dungeon is not a static puzzle waiting to be solved. It's a living place that reacts to your presence. Every door opened shifts the air. Every fight echoes down stone halls. Every torch casts shadows that move and draw attention. Time passes. Guards change shifts. Monsters hear combat and investigate. The wounded orc you let flee? He's rallying his tribe. The treasure you left behind? Someone else might claim it. The world breathes and remembers. Your actions ripple outward, changing what comes next.

FIFTH LAW: RESOURCE MANAGEMENT TENSION

Every torch, every arrow, every point of mana matters.

Cresthaven has a strong resource management component. Spells consume mana. Hit points are lost. Torches burn out. Food gets consumed. Arrows run out. Weight slows you down. Tracking these resources isn't busywork. It's the heartbeat of the game. Tension increases as the party ventures deeper into danger with dwindling supplies.

Mana Powers Magic: Spellcasters use mana to fuel their magic. Each spell has a mana cost. When you're out of mana, you can't cast spells until you rest. Wizards must have their spellbook formulas available to cast.

Druids need connection to the earth and natural places. Clerics cast at the grace of their deity, aka the DM, determines if a prayer is answered based on the cleric's actions and their god's disposition. Rest recovers mana: 10% of your total mana per hour of rest, with 10 hours fully restoring your reserves.

Encumbrance Matters: Your Strength determines how much you can carry. Carry more than half your maximum weight and you become encumbered, moving at half speed with disadvantage on many rolls. That treasure chest might be too heavy to carry out. Do you leave it? Make multiple trips? Hire help?

Time Is Always Ticking: The DM tracks time in turns (10 minutes), rounds (1 minute), and segments (6 seconds). Spells have durations. Torches burn out. Rations get consumed. Every action takes time, and time brings consequences: wandering monsters, exhausted resources, missed opportunities.

Survival Needs: Characters need food and water. Go three days without water or three weeks without food, and you face Constitution saves or suffer the Dehydrated or Starving conditions. Resources can become scarce. Plan accordingly.

Ammunition Counts: Arrows and crossbow bolts aren't unlimited. Track them. When you run out in the middle of a fight, that's a problem.

Mechanical Anchor: Track torches (burn time), rations (1 per day), arrows, mana points, and encumbrance. The DM tracks time and calls for wandering monster checks. Mana recovery: 10% per hour, full recovery in 10 hours. Resource depletion drives the race against time.

The key is making resource management exciting, not tedious. Lower-level adventures might focus on light sources and rations. Higher-level adventures focus on spell slots and hit points. The DM must create meaningful choices: press forward with low resources, or retreat to rest and resupply?

WAYS TO CREATE THIS PRESSURE:

- Time limits (rescue the prisoner before the cult sacrifices them)
- Cost of living (expensive inn rooms drain treasure)
- Blocked paths (the way back collapses, must find another exit)
- Wandering monsters (the longer you linger, the more encounters)
- Mana depletion (press forward without magic, or retreat to rest?)
- Social pressure (you wagered you'd return with specific loot)

The adventure is a race against time. Manage it well, and excitement builds naturally.

DM Tip: Don't bog down play with constant inventory checks. Track time in broad strokes and call for resource updates at natural breaks (after combat, when resting, entering new areas). For clerics, remember that divine favor depends on their actions; a cleric who acts against their deity's tenets may find their prayers going unanswered.

SIXTH LAW: THE WORLD REMEMBERS

Your legend is written in action, not backstory.

In modern games, your character's past actions often get reset or forgotten once you move to the next quest. In Crethaven, the world has a memory. Your deeds, good or evil, follow you. More than that, you leave lasting marks on the world itself.

This is fundamentally different from a game where NPCs react the same way to every character. In Crethaven, if you save a village from bandits, word spreads. If you rob the local temple, people remember. The innkeeper whose daughter you rescued offers you free rooms. The merchant whose goods you stole charges you double, if he'll trade with you at all.

Your reputation isn't a score you manage. It's the natural consequence of living in a world where actions matter. A Paladin who acts heroically finds doors opening. A Thief who steals from the poor finds doors slamming shut. An Assassin is viewed with fear and suspicion from the start, but could earn grudging respect through heroic deeds.

The world doesn't scale to accommodate you. It reacts to you. High reputation attracts noble quests and loyal followers. Low reputation attracts criminal contacts and mercenaries. Shopkeepers adjust their prices based on whether they trust you. Guards decide whether to let you pass or stop you for questioning.

Guilds and factions remember. Aid the local thieves' guild and they may offer you contracts. Cross them and you'll find enemies in every shadow. The mages' order, the merchant consortium, the military guard, each faction tracks your relationship with them. Their resources open or close based on your history.

Your fortune bleeds away. A good inn costs 2 gold per night. Common lodging is 5 silver. Even poor accommodations cost 2 silver. Meals, equipment repair, spell components, hireling wages, all drain your coffers. That dungeon treasure won't last forever. The cost of living grinds down even legendary heroes.

You build something that lasts. As you advance, you might establish a stronghold, a tower, a temple. These aren't just mechanical benefits. They're your mark on the world. Your fortress stands as testament to your

deeds. Your temple draws followers. Your wizard's tower becomes known throughout the land. Between adventures, you engage in downtime activities: research, crafting, politicking, training. The world continues whether you're adventuring or not.

Mechanical Anchor: The DM tracks reputation on a scale (typically -5 to +5). Reputation affects shop prices, quest availability, NPC reactions, and hireling loyalty. Major actions change reputation by +1 or -1.

This creates a living, breathing world where your choices echo forward. You're not just a nameless adventurer. You're a person building a legacy, for good or ill. The world watches. The world judges. The world remembers. And you leave your mark upon it.

LEGACY AND ALIGNMENT

Every choice shifts your moral gravity. The world is watching how you act. Crethaven doesn't use rigid alignment systems, but it does recognize moral consequence. Save the innocent repeatedly and you become known as a hero. Betray your allies and you become known as treacherous. Your actions define you more than any label on a character sheet. The question isn't "What's my alignment?" but "What have I done, and what will I do next?"

THE REWARD OF DARING

Those who act boldly earn renown, strange favor, or ruin. Fortune smiles on nerve. The player who tries the impossible swing across the chasm, the one who bluffs their way past the demon, the one who risks everything for a desperate gambit, these are the moments that become legend. Play it safe and you'll survive. Play it bold and you'll be remembered. Choose wisely.

THE CYCLE OF PLAY

Understanding the rhythm of Crethaven helps everything flow naturally. Here's how a typical adventure session unfolds:

The Adventure Turn

1. **DM Describes the Scene:** The DM sets the stage, describing what the characters see, hear, and sense. "You enter a dusty chamber. Three exits lead deeper into the ruins. In the center, a stone altar bears strange markings."
2. **Players Declare Actions:** Players describe what their characters do. "I examine the altar for traps." "I listen at the northern door." "I keep watch on the entrance."
3. **DM Decides if Rolls Are Needed:** Not everything requires a roll. Simple actions succeed or fail based

on logic. Uncertain actions require dice.

4. **Results Change the World:** Success and failure both move the story forward. The trap is found (or triggered). The door reveals a passage (or it's locked). Time passes. The world reacts.
5. **Time and Resources Advance:** The DM tracks time. Torches burn. Spells expire. If enough time passes, wandering monsters might appear. Resources deplete.
6. **Return to Step 1:** The cycle continues. New situations arise from the consequences of previous actions.

DM Tip: Keep the cycle moving. Don't let rules lookups or debates break the rhythm. Make a ruling and continue.

SESSION RHYTHM

A typical Crethaven session flows through these phases:

Exploration: The party moves through the environment, gathering information, avoiding or encountering dangers, making decisions about which way to go.

Encounter: The party faces a challenge—combat, negotiation, puzzle-solving, or environmental hazard. Resources are spent. Consequences unfold.

Downtime: Between encounters, characters catch their breath (short rest), tend wounds, and plan their next move. Quick, focused moments.

Rest: After significant challenges or when resources are low, the party seeks safe rest (long rest). This consumes rations and time, allowing recovery but potentially changing the situation.

Back to Exploration: The cycle repeats, building toward the adventure's climax.

Player Tip: Use downtime to plan, share information, and coordinate. Don't wait for the DM to tell you what to do! Discuss your options as a group.

TIPS FOR PLAYERS

1. **Map Everything:** Even a simple flowchart helps. Getting lost in a dungeon with wandering monsters is deadly.
2. **Use Your 10-Foot Pole:** Probing ahead detects many traps automatically. Don't forget mundane equipment.
3. **Scout and Avoid:** You don't need to fight every monster. Treasure-rich lairs are your target, not random encounters.

4. **Protect Your Spell-Casters:** They're your heaviest hitters but also your most vulnerable party members.

5. **Ask Questions Constantly:** Where are the exits? Is the ceiling unstable? Are there cracks in the floor? Observation is your greatest skill.

6. **Hire Help:** Hirelings can carry equipment, hold torches, and absorb damage. Just don't let them decide you're a better source of treasure than the dungeon.

7. **Check the Tavern:** That one-armed veteran might have critical information about the dungeon you're about to enter.

8. **Teamwork Matters:** When attempting difficult actions together, you can combine efforts. One character makes the check using the highest ability bonus in the group, and they roll with advantage.

9. **Retreat Is Victory:** Living to fight another day is success. Dead characters tell no tales.

TIPS FOR THE DUNGEON MASTER

Your role in Crethaven is to serve as the world's impartial voice. You describe what exists, react to player decisions, and make fair rulings when uncertainty arises. You are not the players' opponent, nor their author. You do not tell them what their characters think or feel; you tell them what the world does in response to their actions.

You are part referee, part storyteller, part stagehand, and part improviser. You maintain consistency, fairness, and pace. You interpret the rules, not enforce them mechanically. You bring the world to life, but the players bring it to motion.

DM Principle: The story belongs to the table, not the DM. The DM presents the world. The players decide how to live in it. The dice decide how it all turns out.

PLAYER SKILL THROUGH EXPLORATION

Crethaven does include automatic perception checks, but they are resolved through the character's Notice stat, not a die roll. The DM uses each character's Notice score to determine what they automatically sense, such as sounds, movement, hidden doors, or ambushes, without the player needing to declare an action. Notice is the world reacting to the character's awareness.

Active exploration, however, still depends entirely on the player. When a player describes specific actions, asks detailed questions, or interacts directly with the environment, that is when ability checks or skill rolls come into play.

Your job is to make both systems complement each other. Notice handles what is obvious to the senses,

while good play uncovers what lies beyond them.

Describe clearly what the players see, hear, and sense. Give them enough information to make decisions, but not so much that the mystery disappears. The players' tools are questions, plans, and clever thinking. Reward them for using those tools well. Tao of the DM: Embrace the Chaos

EXAMPLE: SEARCHING A ROOM

The DM uses the character's Notice score in secret. If the result meets or exceeds the DC, the DM might say, "You notice a faint line in the wall, like a seam."

Player: "I tap along the wall, listening for hollow spots."

DM: "One section sounds different, thinner maybe."

Player: "I press it with the butt of my torch."

DM: "A panel gives way, revealing a small compartment inside."

The Notice stat gave the player a hint, but the detailed description is what uncovered the truth. Passive awareness reveals opportunities, and active play makes them matter.

ADJUDICATION, NOT AUTOMATION

Every situation has two questions: "What makes sense?" and "What's at stake?" You do not need to consult the rulebook every time. Make a quick ruling, keep the game moving, and note your decision for consistency later.

Use DCs as guidelines, not commandments. When in doubt, assign a DC between 10 (easy) and 20 (hard), based on how clever or risky the action is. If something should succeed automatically, let it. If something is impossible, say so honestly.

DM Tip: Make your calls decisively and fairly, but always explain your reasoning if asked. Transparency builds trust.

DESCRIPTIVE WORLDS, NOT PREDETERMINED STORIES

Your world should feel alive, a place that reacts and changes. Do not script outcomes. Instead, prepare situations that can unfold in different ways depending on player choices.

If the players bypass your dungeon entirely to negotiate with the goblin chief, follow that thread. The goal is not to bring them back to your notes, it is to bring your notes to them. Every meaningful choice reshapes the world, and your job is to track and reveal those consequences over time.

DM Principle: You are not telling a story that already

exists. You are discovering it together, one decision at a time.

COMBAT SHOULD FEEL DANGEROUS AND ALIVE

Cresthaven combat is meant to be fast, descriptive, and unpredictable. A good fight should feel like a scene from a story, not a math problem. Encourage players to describe how they attack, not just that they attack.

Reward creativity: a fighter pushing an enemy into a brazier, a thief cutting a rope to drop a chandelier, a wizard using a gust of wind to blow out torches. Let these moments shine. If the players' actions are bold and cinematic, match their energy in narration.

On natural 1s, introduce setbacks, not necessarily fumbles, but new dangers. On natural 20s, make the success vivid and decisive. Both sides of the dice should add texture to the world. Tao of the DM: Combat Should Be Colorful

Cresthaven combat uses "Theater of the Mind." This doesn't mean boring. It means imaginative. Players can attempt anything they describe. They can slide between opponents, swing from chandeliers, taunt enemies into traps, whatever they envision. Your job is to handle these attempts fairly and colorfully.

Theater of the Mind doesn't mean you can't use maps. If your group wants to get more tactical, grab some graph paper and tokens (coins, miniatures, whatever) to represent characters and enemies. This can help everyone visualize positioning, distances, and environmental features. The key difference from tactical miniature games is that the map is a reference tool, not a restriction. Players still describe what they're doing narratively, and you still adjudicate creatively. The map simply helps everyone track where things are, especially useful for tracking cover, line of sight, and movement around environmental hazards.

Don't just say: "Roll to hit. Miss. Roll to hit. Hit. Roll damage."

Instead: "Your blade connects with the orc's shield, sending sparks flying. He stumbles backward, and you press the advantage..."

On a natural 1: "Your sword sticks in a crack in the floor" or "You trip and fall prone."

On a natural 20: "You knock his weapon from his hand" or "You slay the orc and kick his body into the one behind him, who's blinded by blood and loses his next attack."

The Environment Is Part of the Battle: Combat in Cresthaven isn't just about swinging swords. The battlefield itself matters. Describe the terrain and let players use it tactically:

- Cover: Characters behind barrels, pillars, or walls

gain +2 to +4 AC. Enemies can't target what they can't see.

- High Ground: Fighting from stairs, platforms, or elevated positions provides tactical advantages.
- Difficult Terrain: Mud, rubble, ice, or tangled roots slow movement and may require Dexterity checks to avoid falling prone.
- Hazards: Fires, pits, cliff edges, chandeliers waiting to fall. These aren't just set dressing. A clever player might shove an enemy into a brazier or cut a rope to drop a chandelier.
- Interactive Elements: Tables to flip for cover, doors to slam and bar, ropes to cut, oil to spill and ignite.

Put these elements in your combat areas. Describe them. When players ask "What's in the room?" tell them about the overturned carts, the slippery moss, the crumbling balcony. Then watch them use these features creatively. Because of Cresthaven's fast, abstract combat system, environmental tactics don't require rules consultations. You are the rulebook. Adjudicate on the fly and keep the action moving.

DM Tip: Before combat starts, mention 2-3 environmental features players can interact with. This plants seeds for creative tactics.

DMING NEW PLAYERS

New players need guidance. Suggest searching for secret doors. Give clues about danger (foul smells, scattered bones, claw marks). Nobody wants to die without warning. But don't hold their hands forever. Once they learn the game, let them think for themselves.

Player Tip: If you're new, pay attention to what experienced players do. Ask questions. Don't be afraid to try unusual solutions.

Referee's Creed

The Five Tenets of Fair Play

1. The DM is the final arbiter. Rules are guidelines. Your judgment in the moment is what matters. Be consistent, but don't be afraid to make calls that serve the story and fun.
2. Dice add uncertainty, not truth. A natural 20 doesn't let you jump to the moon. A natural 1 doesn't mean you accidentally murder your best friend. Adjudicate results within reason and logic.
3. Fairness comes from impartiality, not equality. Don't scale encounters to party level. Don't pull punches. But also don't target one player unfairly or fudge dice to kill characters. Let the dice and the

world be neutral.

4. Player agency is sacred. Never tell players what their characters do, think, or feel (except under magical compulsion). Their characters belong to them. Your job is to present the world and its consequences.
5. Rulings over rules, but consistency matters. Make quick rulings to keep play moving, but remember what you ruled. Players should be able to learn how your world works through play. Don't arbitrarily change rulings from session to session.

SETTING FLAVOR: THE WORLD OF CRESTHAVEN

THE VILLAGE OF CRESTHAVEN

Cresthaven is a small village surrounded by thick forests and rolling hills, a humble but vital refuge for travelers on the Kings High Road. The fields are small and scattered, but well-tended, with rows of wheat, barley, and vegetables. The villagers are hardworking and resourceful, with most engaged in farming or hunting. They are a close-knit community, relying on each other for support and protection in a dangerous and unpredictable world.

The Cross Arms Tavern and Inn serves as a gathering place for travelers and locals alike. Despite its unassuming appearance, Cresthaven provides a much-needed refuge from the horrors of the wilds for miles around.

But Cresthaven is far more than a waypoint on the road. The village is alive with NPCs, each with their own stories, secrets, and needs. Shops line the muddy streets: the blacksmith's forge, the general store, the herbalist's hut. Quest hooks hang in the air like morning mist. The miller's daughter has gone missing. Strange lights flicker in the old cemetery at night. The merchant caravan is three days overdue. Every conversation might lead to adventure. Every building might hold a clue. Cresthaven is a living, breathing community that rewards exploration and curiosity. Spend time here. Talk to people. Ask questions. The village itself is as much an adventure as any dungeon.

BEYOND THE VILLAGE

Beyond Cresthaven lie countless dangers and opportunities. Ruined towers dot the landscape, their original purposes long forgotten. Deep forests hide fey creatures who view mortal trespassers with equal parts curiosity and malice. Ancient crypts wait beneath forgotten hills, their treasures guarded by the restless dead. Every road promises adventure. Every shadow might hide death.

YOUR FIRST SESSION: GETTING STARTED

You have the tools. You understand the philosophy. Now it's time to play.

If you are new to Dungeon Mastering, you do not need to write an adventure or memorize rules. You only need one thing: a place to begin. That place is the Village of Cresthaven, the default starting setting for all Cresthaven games. From there, your players can explore the surrounding wilderness, take on simple jobs from the Quest Board, and uncover the secrets of the nearby ruins.

Start small. Run a short adventure that fits on a single page. Five to ten rooms are enough for your first dungeon. Focus on presenting situations, not stories. The players make choices, you describe the results, and the dice decide the rest.

If you want a guided first experience, begin with the Goblin Raiders adventure. It walks both DM and players through the basics of exploration, combat, and rulings as you play. It is the fastest way to learn how Cresthaven actually feels at the table.

START HERE:

Your story begins at the gates of the Village of Cresthaven.

Read to players

Upon seeing the characters arrive in Cresthaven, a tall and burly man with a thick brown beard and bright, welcoming eyes approaches the adventurers. He wears a green tunic and brown pants with a simple straw hat resting on his head.

"Welcome to Cresthaven, travelers. You look like you have the road on your boots and purpose in your eyes. If you need a roof or a hot meal, the Cross Arms Tavern is just ahead. If you seek work, the Quest Board stands by the Adventurers Guild. What brings you to our village?"

The village is your home base. It is safe, full of NPCs, and alive with opportunity. Players can talk with locals, gather rumors, buy supplies, or rest between adventures. From here, the game can go in many directions, but two paths are perfect for beginning groups.

STARTING CHOICES

These starting adventures are available for free at the official website and are ready to run!

Pests at the Cross Arms Tavern

Strange noises come from beneath the tavern floor. Barrels go missing. The smell of mildew and something worse seeps up from the cellar. The innkeeper begs for help. Beneath the floorboards lies a nest of giant rats, a cunning ratling, and a fog that twists sight and sound.

A complete adventure for 1st-level heroes that can be finished in a single session. It introduces combat, exploration, and simple resource tracking.

Goblin Raiders

South of Cresthaven, goblins have set up camp across the ravine. The townsfolk are uneasy. Some say the goblins are only scavengers, others whisper of an attack. The Iron Guard offers a reward for anyone willing to investigate.

A learn-as-you-play adventure that teaches both Dungeon Masters and players how Cresthaven works, step by step.

DM Tip: Let the players choose which hook to follow. Whichever path they pick becomes their first shared story in the world. Both adventures begin right inside the village and naturally lead back to it for rest, supplies, and new rumors.

CLOSING WORDS

THE SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE

Cresthaven honors the roots of the hobby - where courage, curiosity, and consequence rule the day. This is a game where a clever player with a weak character can outshine an optimized build played without imagination. Where the story emerges from what happens at the table, not what was written beforehand. Where danger is real, death is common, and glory is earned through wit and daring.

You have the tools. Light your torch and take your first step. The question is not "Can I?" it's "What do I do next?"

Welcome to Cresthaven. Your legend awaits.

APPENDIX: FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

If you want to go deeper into the craft of running and imagining adventures, these books, blogs, and novels shaped the heart of Cresthaven. Every one of them has something to teach or inspire.

THE WORLD OF CRESTHAVEN

Official Website: www.cresthavenrpg.com

The living home of Cresthaven RPG. Find our blog, free adventures, rules, DM tools, and new modules. This is where the world grows and changes.

THE ORIGINALS

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (1st Edition) by Gary Gygax

The spark that began it all. Complex, bold, and filled with imagination.

The Basic and Expert Sets (B/X) by Tom Moldvay and David Cook

Simple, fast, and built for endless play. Much of Cresthaven's design philosophy comes from these editions.

A Quick Primer for Old School Gaming by Matthew J. Finch

A short, clear guide to rulings over rules, player skill, and creative problem solving.

MODERN MASTERS OF GAMECRAFT

The Lazy Dungeon Master by Mike Shea (Sly Flourish)

A must-read for any DM. Teaches how to prepare less, improvise more, and focus on what really matters at the table.

<https://slyflourish.com/lazydm>

The Angry GM

Sharp, funny, and brutally honest writing about what makes games fun and how to keep players engaged.

<https://theangrygm.com>

The Alexandrian by Justin Alexander

Smart essays on scenario design, structure, and how to run mysteries and investigations in open worlds.

<https://thealexandrian.net>

FICTION THAT SHAPES THE IMAGINATION

The Lord of the Rings by J. R. R. Tolkien

The root of it all. The tone of courage, loss, and the weight of small deeds echoes through every dungeon.

The Hobbit by J. R. R. Tolkien

Lighthearted, curious, and full of wonder. A perfect reminder that great adventures begin with simple bravery.

Conan the Barbarian Stories by Robert E. Howard

Fast, dangerous, and brutal. Teaches the rhythm of pulp adventure and the grit of survival.

The Wheel of Time by Robert Jordan

A vast epic about cycles, prophecy, and destiny. A reminder that every choice shapes the pattern of the world.

The Dark Elf Trilogy by R. A. Salvatore

Follows Drizzt Do'Urden from exile to heroism. Fast-paced, emotional, and filled with heart. A masterclass in character-driven fantasy.

The Dragonlance Chronicles by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman

The heroes of the lance face gods, dragons, and destiny. Sweeping adventure, heartfelt characters, and the classic feel of high fantasy at its best.

The Icewind Dale Trilogy by R. A. Salvatore

Epic adventure on the frozen frontier. Fellowship, loyalty, and heroism under impossible odds.

The Elminster Series by Ed Greenwood

Chronicles the life of Elminster, the wise and mischievous mage of the Forgotten Realms. Explores the cost of power and the wonder of discovery.

SUGGESTED STARTING PATH FOR FAMILIES

Younger Kids (Ages 8–11):

The Hobbit, Redwall, Narnia, The Enchanted Forest Chronicles

Pre-Teens (Ages 11–13):

Percy Jackson, Ranger's Apprentice, Howl's Moving Castle, Artemis Fowl

Teens (Ages 13–16):

The Belgariad, Earthsea, Dragonlance, Dark Elf Trilogy