THE EVOLUTION OF ARMS LAW

(1980 – 2003)

BY BRENT KNORR
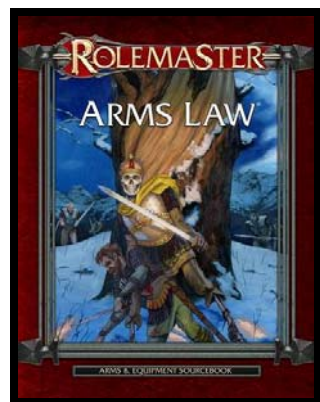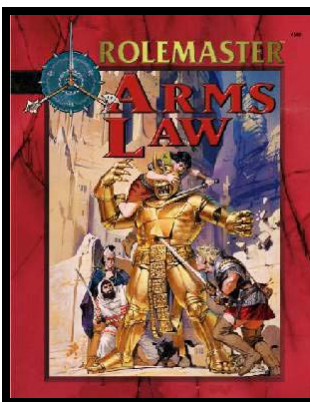
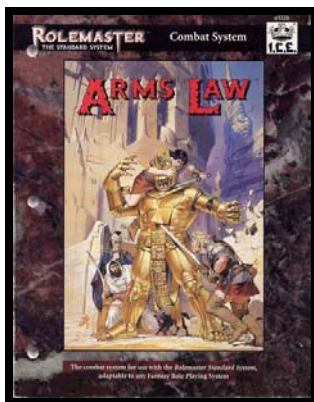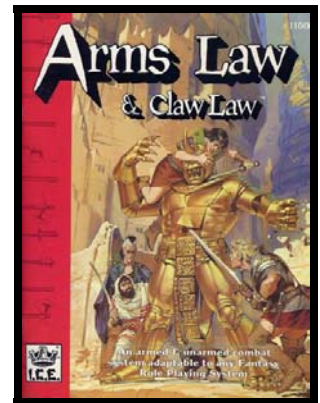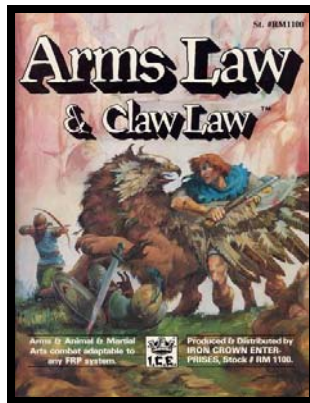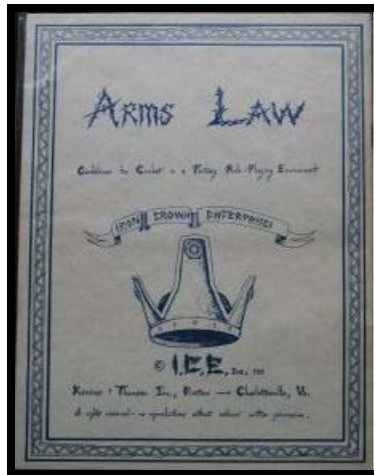The first Rolemaster product ever released by ICE was Arms Law in 1980. It was a combat system that designed to replace the combat system in other Roleplaying games, particularly Advanced Dungeons and Dragons and would serve as the base for the rest of the Rolemaster products to come. The newest version of Arms Law released in 2003 returns to these roots and provides updated conversion guidelines for 3rd Edition Dungeons and Dragons.

This article will examine the various versions of Arms Law that have been produced over the last 23 years.

The basics of Rolemaster combat have not changed much over the years. You choose an Attack Table that matches the weapon you are using, such as Dagger, across the top of the table are the different Armor types, ranging from 1 (unarmored) to 20 (Full Plate Mail). You roll percentage dice, add any appropriate skills and other bonuses or penalties and look that number up on the column under your opponent's armor type. This will give you a number, which is the amount of damage you have done to your opponent. This number may also have a two letter code after it. This indicates that you have done some sort of additional damage and you can roll on a Critical Table. For example, suppose you are attacking an opponent that is wearing a chain shirt. This is Armor Type 13 (AT13). You roll your dice, add your skill and end up with a total of 134. Cross referencing this on the Dagger Attack Table gives a result of "9CS". The "9" indicates that you have done 9 points of damage to your opponent, the "C" indicates that you will be using the "C" column on the Critical Table, and the "S" indicates that you will be using the Slash Critical Table.

To determine the result of the Critical, a straight percentage roll is made, and the resulting die roll is looked up on the appropriate Critical Table. There are four columns on each Critical Table, ranging from A to E. The higher the letter, the more serious the additional damage is for the same die roll, and the higher the die roll, the worse the damage is. The effects of a critical can include bleeding, where your opponent will take additional damage in following rounds of combat, stunning your opponent, which reduces his offensive and defensive capabilities, breaking limbs, all the way up to instant death. The critical tables have color text that describes what has happened, which the Game Master may modify to fit the type of attack. For our example Dagger Attack, lets say we rolled a 77 on the Slash Critical Table. Looking this up in the C column, we might get a result saying "You come in high and fast. Slash muscle and tendons in foe's shield arm. Foe's arm is useless". This also causes an additional 6 points of damage, stuns the opponent for 6 rounds and causes 4 additional points of bleeding each round until the foe's wound is tended to in some manner.

This basic mechanism of Attack Tables and Critical Tables has maintained constant throughout the various versions of Arms Law.

The rest of this article will examine each versions of Arms Law in more detail.

First Edition Rolemaster Arms Law
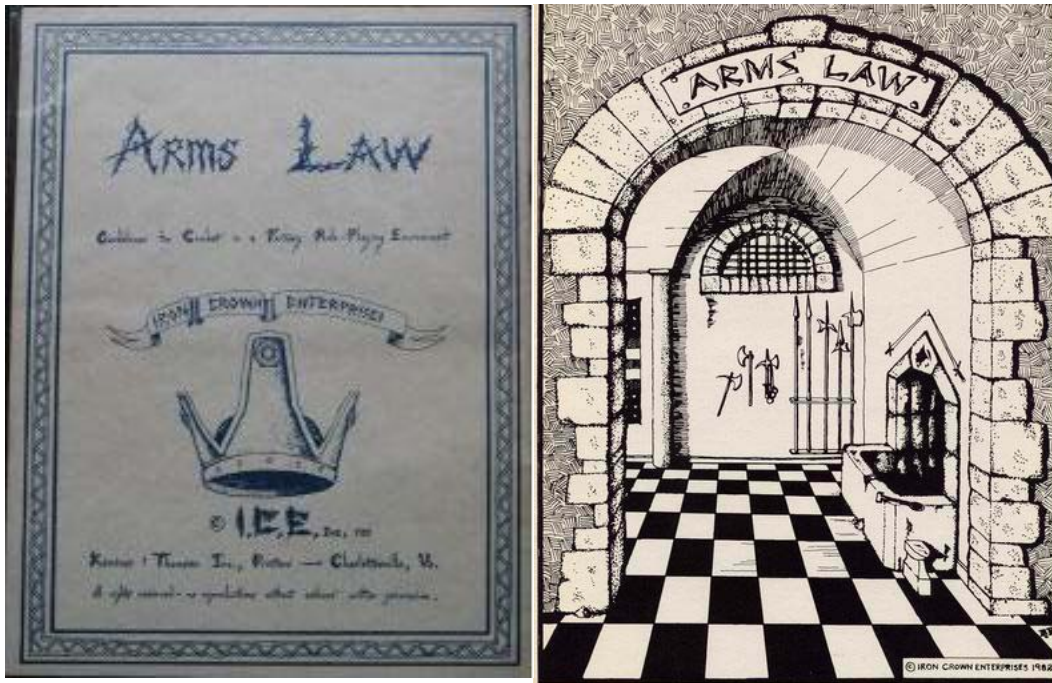
The first version of Arms Law was produced by ICE was printed in 1980. This underwent three printings, the first with a blue and white cover, then two with a black and white cover. There was also a fourth printing that combined Arms Law and Claw Law and had color cover. The books themselves have First, Second, Third, and Fourth Edition printed on them, but this really refers to which printing the book is, all of these are considered to be First Edition Rolemaster products.

The first printing has a 24 page booklet with 30 Attack Tables on heavy grey blue card stock paper. The sheets with the Attack Tables are single sided. The Maneuver Chart and Critical Tables are printed on heavy yellow card stock, double sided.

The second printing contains a small booklet of twelve pages. It has the same material as the booklet for the first printing, but uses a much smaller font. The Attack Tables are printed on the same stock as the first printing, but double sided. The Maneuver Chart and Critical sheets are the same as the first printing. These originally came in a bag and later in a box. The third printing is a saddle-stitched book with perforated pages also on heavy card stock.

Arms Law contains several sections, an Introduction, Definitions, a Tactical Combat Sequence section, which describes the Battle round sequence which is broken down into nine phases.

The fourth section covers Defensive Capabilities in Combat, including descriptions of armor, shields, defensive bonus, and parrying options. Section five covers Offensive Capabilities in Combat including weapon/weapon combinations, and offensive bonuses.

Section six is resolution of combat, including first swing determination and swing and missile attack resolution. The section explains how to use the attack charts and the critical tables.

Section seven covers maneuvering, orientation, and movement.

The tables are section eight. There are five critical strike tables including a slash table, puncture table, crush table, large creature table and super large creature table. It also includes tables for 30 different weapons. There is also a maneuver table and a fumble table. The color text on the critical tables is handwritten.

The second printing of Arms Law includes an additional section nine, which adds sections on a mounted combat, pole arms options, thrown weapons and missiles in melee, two weapon combinations, bow preparation time, notes on changes to some of the tables since first printing, notes announcing the release of Claw Law, and conversion notes explaining how to use Arms Law with Advanced Dungeons and Dragons.

The third printing has some modifications in organization and format and has some additional sections on healing, slaying weapons and armor bonuses.

Dagger Attack Table   Slash Critical Strike Table

Claw Law was released in 1982. It adds additional tables and rules for the Rolemaster combat system. There are three versions of this, the first with loose charts and a similar one that is saddle-stitched with perforated pages. Both of these are printed on heavy card stock, with the cover and critical tables in the yellow/gold color pictured here, and the attack tables in a lighter tan color pictured below. There are also three blue pages with rules and additional tables.

The third version is a saddle-stitched book that has a blue cover with yellow/gold attack tables and blue rules and critical tables.

Claw Law provides five new critical tables, Grapple, Martial Arts Strikes, Martial Arts Sweeps and Throws, Tiny Animal, and Unbalancing. It also includes twelve new attack tables for claws, bite, stingers, trampling, martial arts etc.

One point of interest is the difference in the layout of the Attack tables in Claw Law compared to Arms Law. In Arms Law, the lowest attack number is at the bottom of the page and the highest attack number is at the top. In Claw Law, the Attack Tables are printed in landscape orientation, and the low number is at the top of the page with the high number at the bottom. Claw Law tables also include maximum results for different size attacks. A house cat is limited to the Maximum for Small Attacks on the Bite table, where a Dragon could go all the way up to the Maximum for a Huge Attack.

There are charts with summaries of Historical and Fantasy Weapons, Animal and Monster Combat Capabilities, a section with Guidelines for using Martial Arts and a table with a summary of Martial Arts Combat Capabilities, broken down by Form (Karate, Kung Fu, etc) and belt/degree.

A boxed set was also released that contained Arms Law and Claw Law.

Bite Attack Table   Claw Law:Arms Law Box Set

St. #RM1100

Arms Law & Claw Law

Arms & Animal & Martial Arts combat adaptable to any FRP system.

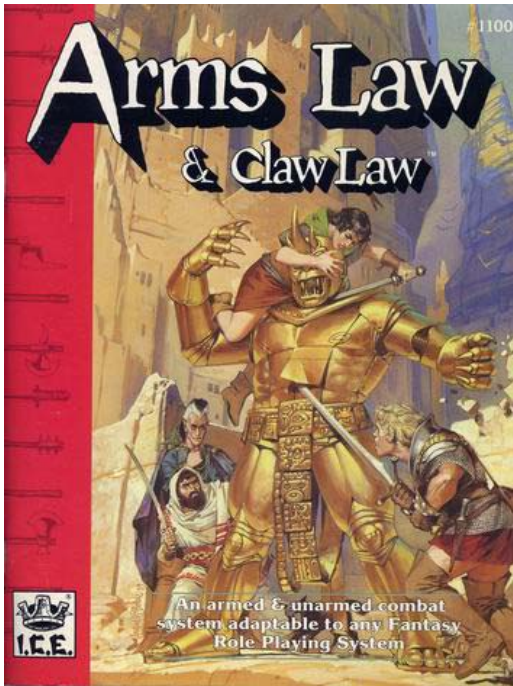Produced & Distributed by IRON CROWN ENTER-PRISES, Stock # RM 1100.

The "Fourth Edition" or printing of Arms Law combines Arms Law and Claw Law into a single book with a glossy cover. The pages containing the charts are printed on lighter weight cardstock pages than the previous versions, but are no longer perforated for easy removal. A section 10 is added that contained clarifications on Martial Arts, Critical Results, a Note on Canceling Actions, Effects of "Stun" Rounds, Position Bonuses, The Importance of Parrying, clarification on Missile Ranges, Optional Armor Damage Rule, and an Optional Shield Bash rule.

The Table of Contents shown below is from the fourth edition, but is similar in the previous editions.

CONTENTS (Claw Law)
11.0 CLAW LAW

Second Edition Arms Law

Second Edition Arms Law is similar to the Fourth printing of First Edition Arms Law, with some changes to the rules. It is printed entirely on regular paper instead of card stock and is 96 pages long rather than 72. It also uses a slightly bigger font which improves the readability greatly.

The Introduction is expanded from one paragraph to two pages and includes a description of the other Rolemaster products, a note explaining that Boxed text throughout the book is used to indicate guidelines for using Arms Law with another FRP system. The Introduction also includs a much needed explanation on Dice Rolling Conventions in the Rolemaster system.

The Definitions section is also expanded from a quarter page to a full page.

The third section, the Tactical Combat Sequence, is where the biggest change between First and Second Edition takes place. The percentage activity required to make a missile attack is reduced from 75% to 50%. The "Missile" phases in the Tactical Combat sequence are renamed to "Fire" phases and a second Fire Phase (and Fire Result Phase) is added after the Movement/Maneuver Phase. The Tactical Combat Sequence section is expanded from one page to three pages, with more detailed explanations given for each phase, and additional coverage of Movement Conflicts, Canceling Actions and Haste and Speed.

Sections 4 and 5, Defensive and Offensive Capabilities are also expanded and clarified, with the addition of several tables making it much easier to understand.

Section 6, Combat Resolution is expanded, again, the tables referred to are moved to be on the same page that references them. "First Strike Determination" is renamed to be "Initiative Determination" and most of the discussions are expanded.
The Maneuvering and Movement section is also cleaned up and expanded, adding rules for determining the Base Movement Rate including tables with modifications for Stride and Pace. Methods and charts for calculating Encumbrance and Exhaustion are also added.

Section 8 is the index for the Arms Law Charts. The charts themselves are in the back of the book. The charts that are included are the same charts as in previous versions of Arms Law, although the "Crush" table got renamed to "Krush" and the "Bare Fist" table

got renamed to "Armored Fist". An error was introduced to the Broadsword table in this printing, a result of 149 against AT10 is listed as "18EK" instead of "22ES". This error persisted until the RMFRP reprint. The tables did get reformatted to improve readability, the Critical Tables are typed instead of hand written, but the text remained the same.

Dagger Attack Table   Slash Critical Table

Section 9 contains Optional Rules for:
- Changing Targets
- using Missile Weapons in Melee
- Firing While Moving
- Reloading
- adding an element of Chance for Initiative Determination
- Shield Bash
- Weapon Bonuses for Missile Weapons
- Optional Armor Damage Rule
- Bare Hand Attacks
- Additional Effects of "Stun" Rounds

Section 10 is Non-Rolemaster GM Guidelines, including sections on Healing and AD&D Conversion Notes, and Martial Arts Guidelines (for those not using Character Law).

Section 11 is the index to the Claw Law Tables. The tables themselves are in the back of the book and are the same tables as in the previous printing of Claw Law, again, being reformatted for improved readability.
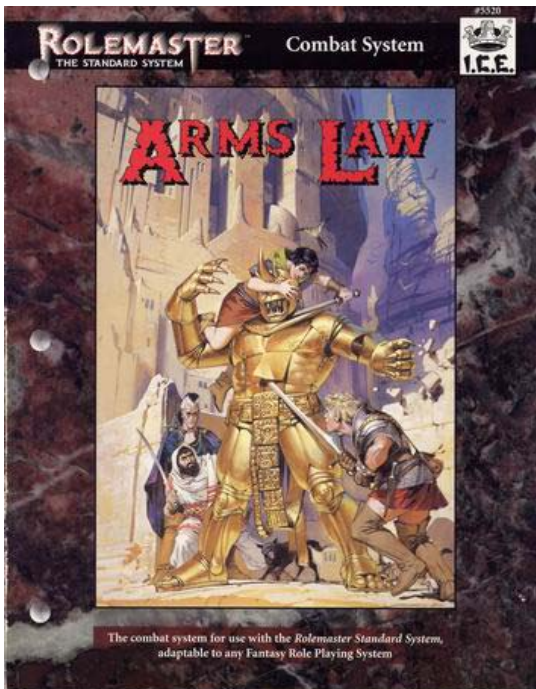
11.1.2 BITE ATTACK TABLE

Bite Attack Table

Section 12 is called Additional Weapon Statistics, and Section 13 is called Animal and Monster Statistics

The last section, Section 14, is a two page Questions and Answers section which offers additional clarifications.

RMSS Arms Law

RMSS (Rolemaster Standard System) was a major rewrite of the Rolemaster system which took place in 1995. Surprisingly, Arms Law didn't change much other than in format. This is mainly because the rules for Combat are moved into different book, the Rolemaster Standard Rules book. All the rules for combat that had been in the Second Edition Arms Law are moved to the back of the RMSS Arms Law as "Appendices, How to Use Arms Law without Rolemaster". The actual content of this section was virtually unchanged from Second Edition.

The book itself is square bound, 144 pages, three hole punched, with perforated pages, which theoretically would allow for easy removal of the charts. In practice, the perforations are often too close to the hole punches and you are better off hacking off the spine if you wanted to remove the pages. The pages themselves are on ordinary paper, so

if you do remove them, you have to either laminate them or put them into page protectors if you want them to last.

Some of the changes included the removal of the Armored Fist Attack Table and the addition of the Brawling Attack Table. The Brawling Attack Table is in the format of the Claw Law Tables, landscape with Maximum Results for various sizes whereas the Armored Fist Attack Table had been in the format of the Arms Law Tables.

Two new Critical Strike Tables are added, the Brawling Critical Strike Table and the Subdual Critical Strike Table. A Non-Weapon Fumble Table is also added.

Breakage numbers for weapons are added to the attack tables.

The format of the tables is very similar to those in Second Edition, the Critical tables are slightly reformatted to have more color text and symbols added to indicate rounds of bleeding, stun, must parry and no parry. Although the color text did change somewhat, the actual combat effects remained the same. Most of the additional page count was used up by printing the Critical Tables appropriate to the Attack Tables on the back of the each Attack Table, half size if there are two appropriate Critical Tables.

Somehow, in this printing, the Dagger attack table lost the line for a result of 60.

All the Tables did get renumbered in this printing so they are no longer the same as previous editions of Arms Law.

RMFRP Arms Law
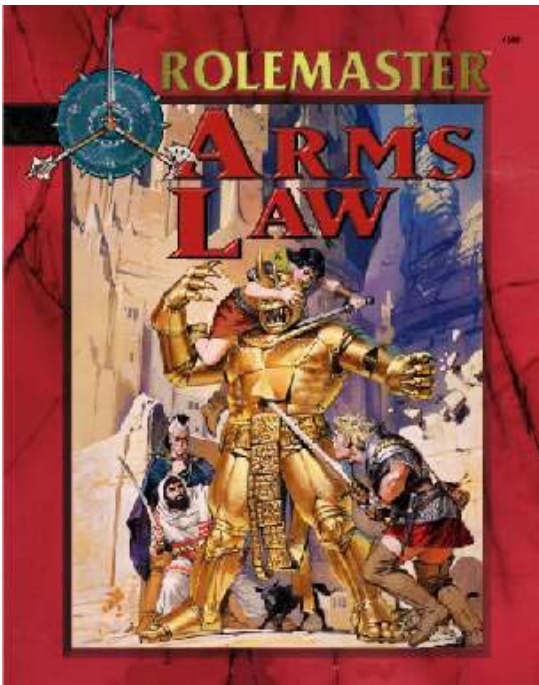
In 1999, the RMSS line was halted and Rolemaster Fantasy Role Playing, or RMFRP for short, was started. This was to be basically a reprint of Rolemaster Standard System, being advertised as 95% compatible. The RMFRP version of Arms Law is virtually identical to the RMSS version, even down to both of them missing a row for a result of 60 on the Dagger table. However, they did fix the typo for a result of 149 against Armor Type 10 on the Broadsword Table in the RMFRP version. It was now properly listed as doing 22EK instead of 18EK. The RMFRP version eliminates one extra printing of the Krush Critical Strike table. The chart on page 92 in RMFRP is missing the listing for 4.14 Non-Weapon Fumble Table, but the chart itself is in the book. A couple of the appendices on how to use Arms Law without Rolemaster that are in the RMSS version are missing from the RMFRP version, these are "The Tactical Combat Sequence" and "Maneuvering and Movement" and "Optional Rules".

RMFRP Arms Law revised
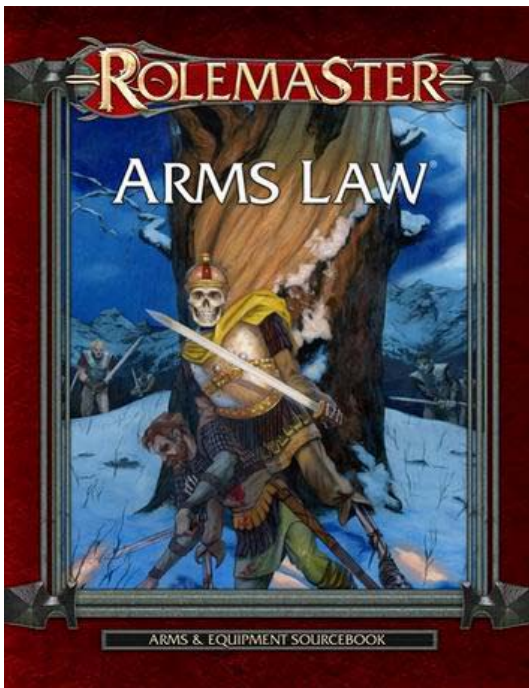
In April 2003, a new version of Arms Law was released for RMFRP, the first product to use the new Rolemaster logo.

This version of Arms Law is an 80 page saddle stitched book instead of a 120 page square bound book like the previous version. Most of this space is gained by not including the half size Critical Tables on the backs of the Attack Tables. The reduced page count also keeps the price down to $16.00 instead of being in the $20.00 to $22.00 range.

The Introduction covers what Arms Law is and how it is trying to simulate combat situations as "believable fun, not drab realism." It also describes what is new in this version of Arms Law.

This is the first version to actually change the attack tables, replacing the single number progression used in previous versions with a smoothed progression, i.e. 67-69, 148-150. This is the same way the Attack Tables for Spells are done, as well as the Attack Tables for Spacemaster.

This style of table was also use in The Armory, an Arms Law supplement which was released in 2002. The Armory had also introduced the idea of a weapon having a *primary critical* such as Slash and for many of the weapons, one or two alternate criticals that the attacker has the option of choosing. The choice must be made before the attack roll is made, and there is set penalty ranging from 5 to 30 points that is subtracted from the attack roll if the alternate critical is selected. This is also used for many of the weapons in this new version of Arms Law.

Another change is that the weights and lengths of some of the weapons have been adjusted after comparison to historical weapon weight and lengths.
The flavour text of the criticals has also been updated, returning to the more "interesting" style of the earlier versions of Arms Law. The actual game effects of the criticals remains the same to preserve compatibility with previous versions.

Section 1.0 is "How to use Arms Law", which gives descriptions, definitions and tables relating to some of the terms used in the book such as Defensive and Offensive Bonuses, Armor Types, etc. It's basically the same material that is described in previous editions. It includes three full page charts with Weapon Statistics, Animal Statistics, and Monster Statistics

Section 2.0 is "Making an Attack" and it runs through how to use the Attack Tables and the Critical Tables. Section 2.04 is the new section on the Optional Criticals and is the one section that players familiar with previous editions of Arms Law and Rolemaster should read.

This is followed by the Attack Tables, these cover the same Weapons and Attacks as previous versions, 29 Weapon Attack Tables, 13 Special Attack Tables, 12 Critical Strike Tables, and 2 Fumble Tables. The Special Attack Tables have not changed at all since the previous version of Arms Law. I was a little surprised that the Weapon Attack Tables and the Special Attack Tables still have the results columns in opposite order. I thought that since the Weapon Attack Tables were being redone anyway, they might take the opportunity to switch them from going from the highest number at the top of the page and the lowest number at the bottom, to being lowest at the top and highest at the bottom to be consistent with the Special Attack Tables.

There is an unfortunate error that has made it's way into the Critical Tables in the first printing of this version of Arms Law. A "1" accidentally got inserted before critical results that indicate a negative modifier. This implies that the penalty would only last for one round, which is not correct.
So when it says "1" preceded by a negative modifier ignore the "1", the penalty lasts until the wound is healed. For example, the last line for a 66 result in the "A" column on the Brawling Critical Strike Table says "+8H-6*-1(-15)". This would be read as "8 additional hits, 6 rounds of Stun, -15 penalty for 1 round. It really should be a permanent -15 penalty until healed. ICE has promised to post a pdf file with the corrected charts on their website, it should be available by the time this article is printed.

The last section of the book is "Converting to Arms Law from Other Systems". This is a three page section that covers how to use Arms Law with Dungeons & Dragons Third edition (D20), Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (which I suspect would work with Hackmaster as well), GURPS, Legends of the Five Rings, Werewolf: the Apocalypse, and other Dice Pool Systems.

Related Products

There are a couple of products that are related to Arms Law that are worth mentioning. Weapon Law: FireArms came out in 1996 under the RMSS system and contains more than forty Attack Tables and seven new Critical Tables for use with firearms from the time they were invented up to modern day.

10 Million Ways to Die was released in 1999 and was basically a streamlined version of Arms Law. It had more generic type attack tables, such as Light One-Hand Bladed Weapons and Plasma Pistol Weapons. It does have the advantage of covering weapons and armors all the way from your basic fantasy types all the way up to the science fiction varieties all in one book.

Blaster Law was released for Spacemaster in 2002 and contained 13 Laser Attack Tables, 13 Blaster Attack Tables, 10 Plasma Weapon Attack Tables, 5 Sonic Stunner Attack Tables and 20 Critical and Fumble tables.

As mentioned earlier, the Armory was also released in 2002. It added over fifty additional Attack Tables, including the "Nodwick" Attack Table (how much damage can the average henchbeing do when tossed?).

Thank You

I'd like to thank Anthony Maletta for his help with the information on the first printing of the First Edition Arms Law and general support. I'd also like to thank Grimner (Jonas Persson) for information on the version of Claw Law with the blue cover, and Guillaume, Turamber, KarisDad, MarkC and the other folks on the ICE Forums for their help and assorted tidbits of information.