The List of Character Survival Techniques v1.2

This is the list so far (last updated May 23rd 1999). It contains advice for both low-tech and hi-tech games. It may sometimes seem a bit incongruous, with AD&D stuff right next to something directly from a cyberpunk game, but all in all I think the point usually comes across. Anyway, I've tried to keep the advice general enough to be of use in a wide range of games. I've also tried to keep it practical and to avoid such advice as 'don't get shot' or 'don't mess with dragons' (heaven help you if you needed to be told those things :-)

The most recent version of this list can be found on my website at http://home.wxs.nl/~jvdriel. For those of you who wish to put the list on your own website, that's fine by me as long as: a. it's not done for profit and b. the contents aren't altered. If you let me know that you've put the list on your site, I'll make sure you automatically get any new versions.

Finally, I'd like to give a warm thanks to everyone who sent in their advice and comments. This list wouldn't have been possible without you.

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[Note: * indicates new or revised entries.]

USEFUL EQUIPMENT

1. The 10 ft pole (Thaddeus Moore)
As in the expression "I wouldn't touch that with a ten foot pole!" Well I guess u could carry a larger one. In a party I once played with the thief carried a collapsible 10 ft pole, made of sections with treaded ends so they could be screwed together. I think he also had some kind of pulley operated claw at the end. For picking things up, very useful for detecting trip wires and pulling suspicious levers too.

2. Bandages (Lloyd Revious)
Bandages are a must!!! Unless your DM just kills you and doesn't do unconsciousness or bleeding to death.

3. Chalk
A good way to keep from getting lost in dungeons and mazes. When you leave a mark, add a small, hardly noticeable detail so that you'll be able to tell if someone has messed around with your signs.

4. Crowbar
At least one person in the group should carry one. That way, you won't have to start using Excalibur to pry open a wooden chest or door. In an emergency, a crowbar will also serve as a weapon.

5. Straps (Lloyd Revious)
String or leather tie straps are almost as useful as rope. Then you don't have to cut up your much needed climbing rope to tie up a prisoner (or whatever).

6. Lightsources
Always carry torches, a flashlight or some other form of illumination. A coin with continual light cast on it is popular in many AD&D campaigns, though you shouldn't neglect to bring some ordinary lightsources with you as well. Otherwise a simple dispel magic could leave you groping in

the dark. A burning torch can also be useful as a weapon, especially against animals and regenerating monsters.

7. Piano Wire (Thaddeus Moore)

Thin very strong (metal?) wire, can be used to bind things together or for trip wires. Use in conjunction with spikes and drive them in at various heights. While traveling through a dimly lit corridor the group came to a wooden door. They listen and heard orcish voices on the other side. So they doused all the torches on the walls. And set up piano wire at head level by driving spikes into the wall and fastening the wire to them. Then the group's fastest runner opened the door, taunted the orcs and took off down the hall. The party had notched the wall where the wire was. And the runner was able to duck and keep running. While the orcs got some nasty head aches.

8. Firestarters

Fire is one of the most useful things there is. It can be used for illumination, warmth and destruction. You should always carry the means for making fire, whether it's old-fashioned flint and steel or a zippo-lighter.

9. The small mirror on a stick

Ideal for looking around corners. Also useful if you're being shot at and don't want to stick you're head out of cover (believe me, taking a quick peek only works in the movies. In real life (well, real role-playing), a quick peek isn't enough to give you any useful information but it's certainly enough for a sharpshooter to add a third eye).

10. Rope (The Wizard)

Rope, you can never have enough, every PC should carry some, and at least one PC should have a grapple hook. Try to get silk rope, lighter and stronger.

11. Wooden wedges

Wedges are extremely useful things to have in your inventory. Shoving a wedge under a door is a much quicker way of blocking it than by piling up furniture (of course, you should always make sure the door opens in the right direction). Alternatively, a wedge can keep doors from closing behind you (secret doors tend to have this nasty tendency).

12. Fire extinguisher (Boltcutter)

[Shadowrun] Keep a fire extinguisher by the bedside; ritual magic's payback, and payback's a bitch.

13. Missile weapons

Always have a missile weapon with you, even if it's only a couple of darts or a small pistol and even if you don't have the relevant skill. If an enemy is coming at you from a distance, a missile weapon basically means you get some free attacks. Also, there will be times when a gun or bow is simply the only way you can reach the enemy. And finally, a missile weapon can be very useful for intimidation purposes.

14. ID (Craig L Wigda)

Always have a spare "fake" ID handy (several if you can get them). Have "real" or "false" permits for your gear (cyberware or weapons, or any other restricted items).

15. Fake plates (Craig L Wigda)

Have at least two other sets of license plates made up for your vehicle that match a "legally" registered vehicle of the same make and model (having the fake ID to go with the plates is also needed, just for your common traffic offenses).

16. Smoke grenades
Try to think of smoke grenades as portable cover. If you get pinned down by enemy fire, a well-placed smoke grenade might be your only way out. (My own group got stuck in a building once. We were completely surrounded by snipers and getting to the nearest neighboring building meant having to run across a lot of open ground. I would have given a lot of nuyen to have had some smoke-grenades back then.)

17. Stethoscope
Useful for finding out if there's anybody on the other side of a door, or for listening in on conversations in the room next-door.

18. Pistols and knives (Blank Dave)
Pack a pistol and a knife (both are easy to hide, cheap to lose, and are like brains (everyone's got one, but few use them). They will go unnoticed, and if not they probably won't draw much attention, unlike monoswords and assault shotguns. Neither might pack much kick, but their general utility level makes up for that.)

19. Nasties (Lloyd Revious)
One thing I also like to do <...> is add some nasties. Like say caltrops, snap traps, dog pepper, or anything else your devious heart desires.

20. Stun weapons
Always carry some sort of stun weapon (tasers, darts coated with sleeping poison, etc.) in case you need to capture someone unharmed (for example: a partymember who has been possessed or has gone berserk). You might even want to consider making a stun weapon your primary weapon of choice. People who don't leave trails of corpses behind usually get less hassle from the law. You also run less risk of being hunted down by the familymembers or friends of your victims (a lot of action movies are based on that concept and who knows where your gamemaster gets his or her ideas).

21. Protective clothing
You never know what you're going to have to touch or walk on, so a pair of heavy gloves and strong boots should definitely be part of your inventory. Players in a more futuristic setting might want to carry some gloves and boots capable of withstanding toxic waste. If you've got the money and vehicle-space, bring along an entire environment-suit. Which reminds me: NEVER, EVER go on a space-journey without a vacuum-suit. Somewhere along the line, your ship *will* get a hull breach (they always do. Sigh). Make sure you keep the suit handy and that you know how to use it. If you haven't got an appropriate skill, then at least train until you're able to:
a. get into and out of it without too much delay.
b. seal the suit and activate life-support (make sure you *have* life-support).
c. seal ruptures (buy some suitpatches for this).

* 22a. Paper and pen (Klaus AE. Mogensen)
Useful for drawing maps, writing messages, doing calculations, drawing portraits ("Have you seen this man?"). The paper can also be used as kindling, to wrap things, and as a fan.

* 22b. (bardic_delusions@my-dejanews.com)
Also the paper can be waved in front of a guard while stating "Important message for your boss" as you stroll past. As long as they don't get to read your laundry list you may get by. In a similar vein you can walk around ostentatiously taking notes and asking questions and people may assume you belong.

* 22c. Blank Dave
Don't forget a badly faded piece of ID. Man I can't believe Superman believed me when I said my union card was a Cross Dimensional Immigration Authority card.

* 23. Sticky stuff (Darkwalker)
I would also add Duct Tape and Super Glue to the list. I've found endless uses for them.

COMBAT

1. Standard operating procedure (Thomas R Nelson)
Have an S.O.P. for battles, i.e., these guys in front/left/middle/ right, and these guys in back, clerics casting this and this, and mages casting this and this. There aren't that many different situations you'll encounter. When you're under attack, if you ALWAYS set up the same way for the fight, then you'll get quicker at it and not only will the players react better as a team, but also it can make a difference whether you spend a round coordinating or can get set quickly. i.e., we spent two rounds deciding who does what and in the meantime, the monster was able to close on our mage; or the fighter went to close with the monster, but the mage was casting a lightning bolt at him, so the fighter moved into the path of the bolt and...

2. Keywords/phrases (Bardic_Delusions@my-dejanews.com)
In certain circumstances a character yelling one word or phrase could make everyone do "the right thing". Little things like "double team right" might mean the mage and right fighter are to combine on the right side enemy. Customize the concept to your team and abilities.

3a. Concentrating attacks (Sean Emmott)
Concentrate as many attacks as possible on one opponent: the quicker one is killed, the sooner there's one less attack on your group.

* 3b. (Klaus AE. Mogensen)
While this may be true in AD&D, it's not necessarily true in games where damage impairs the ability to fight. In HERO or Rolemaster (for instance), if all PCs attack different opponents in the first round, they may be able to stun them, so they can't hit back. In Rolemaster, HarnMaster, Storyteller and other games to numerous to mention, damaged characters get combat penalties, so even if they aren't stunned, they are unlikely to hit you. In many games with reasonable combat rules, the best mass combat tactic is to let the poor fighters perform holding actions (parry for all they're worth) while the good fighters finish off _their_ opponents.

4. To fight or not to fight... (D.G. Larush)
Know when NOT to fight- A thief or mage who is out of spells is NOT useless in a fight as long as you realize that you can be valuable while not fighting. Reining up the horses, pulling wounded party members out of combat, throwing burning oil. These can all aid the party without placing a wounded or otherwise non-battle ready party member in jeopardy.

5. Evil altars (Boltcutter)
Don't leap on the, actively used, altar to the Evil God to get a better swing at someone.

6. Surrendering (D.G. Larush)
Surrender IS an option- I almost lost a character once because I got too "heroic" and never even considered paying off highwaymen as an option. Learn to recognize when the DM is hinting that you're outnumbered (forty of the king's archers with arrows nocked is a good sign), and learn to be

able to eat crow and surrender when appropriate. A good DM will never let your characters rot in jail forever, but will use it to further the plot. What do you think thieves are for?

* 7. Cover
Use cover if any is available. Anyone who needlessly stands out in the open during a firefight deserves every bullet he gets. Remember that cover can sometimes be shot _through_ (not even stone walls can always provide safety), so try to never give away your exact location. For instance, if someone tried the old 'hat on a stick' trick with me, I guarantee you I wouldn't be aiming at the hat.

8. Melee against groups
When fighting against a large group in melee combat, always make sure you have your back against a wall or another large object so you can't be attacked from behind. Even better, try fighting from an enclosed space such as a doorway or a narrow pass. That way, even less enemies can get at you and, more importantly, you still have the option of retreat. If you yourself have the advantage of numbers, then be sure to use it. Surround your enemy so there's always someone who can attack from the rear, try to catch the opponent in a cross-fire, etc.

9. Pursuit
If you have an advantageous position, the enemy might try to lure you out of it by retreating. If you were winning before the withdrawal, you'll probably feel a strong urge to pursue and continue the fight. Only do this if you're sure the enemy is broken and disorganized. If they're not, you'll most likely be running into an ambush.

CHARACTER CREATION

* 1. Spell selection
When choosing your spells (or mutations or psionic powers or whatever) make sure that the spell isn't superfluous. A lot of spell effects can be achieved just as well by having the right equipment or by the skills of your fellow partymembers. For instance, if you're a low-level mage and have several warriors in your party, go light on the combat spells. Most of the time, the damage you can do with them is negligible compared to what the fighters will dish out. Pick something more useful instead.

2a. Skills
With all the combat skills to pick from, it's often easy to overlook the more unobtrusive ones. Don't forget skills like swimming, riding (or driving) and reading/writing.

2b. (Blank Dave)
Always have a medical skill, First aid will do (if only one person has such skills, you can be almost guaranteed he'll be the first one in need of those skills when the fighting breaks out).
Always have some form of combat skill (a fight will always break out, being able to defend yourself is a must. Even non combat oriented games will usually have a physical fight somewhere).

3. Group input (Blank Dave)
As a group make your characters as a group. Too often the characters are independently made. This results in holes in the group. By making characters as a group, it is possible to provide a better width and depth to the group. Think what happened when no one made a cleric or magic user.

4. Powerlevel

Strange as it may seem, sometimes your odds are better if you don't try to create an all-powerful character. There are several reasons for this:

a. GM compensation. It's a gamemaster's job to provide the players with a challenge. If you create characters capable of taking on a tank, then tanks are what you'll get.

b. Overconfidence. Powerful characters usually wade into combat without even considering if there's another way of dealing with the situation. They often forget that combat can be deadly no matter how strong you are.

c. Lack of character attachment. Powerful characters rarely have interesting non-combat skills or equipment, because the player spent all his resources on boosting fire-power. The end result is usually a combat machine with about as much originality as the average toaster. Because of this, the player tends to care much less about keeping the character alive.

If you're used to playing terminator-type characters, it can be quite difficult to make a change. Power gamers usually shudder at the thought of not maxing out a combat skill, and start sweating at the idea of actually spending some points on charisma or social skills. The best advice I can give is this: when creating a character, choose one thing that most defines the character. This could be anything. Perhaps your character is a thief with a love for climbing. Or perhaps she grew up near the ocean and loves ships. Or tends to be very curious. Or wants desperately to be a part some social group. Or has a drug problem that he's trying to beat. Or wants to be the first mage to perfect the growing (and domestication) of really big carnivorous plants. Once you establish the core concept, the rest of the character usually comes naturally and you'll feel much less inclined to spend all your character resources on combat.

* 5. Be interesting (Xiphias Gladius)
I have had at least one GM change a die roll so that I didn't die, just because he liked my character. In my experience, GMs are much more willing to let boring characters poorly played die, while they will go out of their way to find some way of keeping favorite fun characters alive.

NEGOTIATIONS

* 1. Talking is an option (ChAoS)
One overlooked survival technique is to talk. Many people die because they attack the too tough for them creature because "it's there" or "it's evil". But kings have armies, some monsters gate in help (some fiends gated help can also gate), and sometimes you just aren't tough enough. But talking may give you a chance to deal with the enemy, get an idea of its plans, find a weakness, or deal with the villain while others sneak by to complete the mission. Perhaps he'd GIVE you the goal of the quest if you do something for him. <...> As usual talking requires judgement but may save you a painful death.

* 2. Some basic rules of thumb
Never let on how badly you need the other parties help. And always be sure to let your most charismatic/silvertongued partymember do the talking.

* 3. Truth (D.G. Larush)
Never assume the other guy is telling the truth. All too often I've seen PC's take the word of any NPC as gospel truth, even if the NPC has obvious reasons to lie (i.e. is having the crap beat out of him by the PC's)

* 4. Motivation (D.G. Larush)
Always keep the other guy's motivations in mind. The key to negotiation is figuring out what the other guy wants. Is the other guy a mercenary? Offer double what the other guy's paying. Is the

other guy a Techie? How about some flashy tech? Is he a religious devotee? Hope you know enough about theology to convince him that you're in the right.

* 5a. Lying (Ryan Mark Vurlicer)
Don't lie unless you need to. I've seen many PCs who ended up as pathological liars when talking with NPCs, when there was no known reason to lie. Often, the NPCs eventually found out they were being lied to. This does not make for successful negotiations.

* 5b. (Jim Davies)
And when you do lie, make absolutely sure that you know what you said. Lies are harder to remember. It's often a good idea to make sure that the GM remembers it as well, so that you can at least agree on something.

* 6. Losing face
When you've got your opponent over a barrel, make sure he knows it but be careful not to rub his nose in it too much. If you do, he might decide to refuse your demands, regardless of the consequences. There are people who would rather die than be extorted/humiliated, especially by someone they don't respect, so loss of face should be kept to a minimum. Staying polite helps. And occasionally you might want to consider giving up something relatively invaluable, so your opponent has something to show his own people that can be interpreted as a victory.

* 7. Ask for the moon (bill.dowling@ibm.net)
Don't be afraid to ask for the moon. The other party may have no use for it.

GENERAL ADVICE AND STRATEGY

1. Keeping your Polish minedetector alive
When exploring a dungeon with a lot of traps, the person who walks point basically acts as a Polish minedetector. Needless to say that this person should have a lot of hitpoints/dexterity/good saving throws/luck. Since a lot of traps are of the pitfall variety, the pointman should always hold on to a rope that is also being held by the other partymembers. That way, if the floor collapses beneath him, he won't immediately be turned into hero-kebab on the spikes that traditionally line the floor of any self-respecting pitfall.

2. Marching orders
Several people have remarked to me about the importance of this. Though the actual marching orders will vary depending on the party in question, the general order usually resembles something like this:
Point: any character with stealth.
Front: warriors, preferably with distance weapons available.
Middle: vulnerable characters.
Rear: warriors again or other characters with at least a little bit of combat power.

3. Splitting up the party
Never. Ever. No matter how good an idea it may seem at the time. Remember that 'divide and conquer' works just as well for the enemy. If you are, by some act of God, forced to split up, then at least agree on a rendezvous-point and time and also on a recognition sign or password (shapeshifters can be a real pain in the butt).

4. The Law (Dave Brohman)

Use the proper authorities whenever possible. The cops are a lot less likely to think you are a crook when they see you show up every three month bright and chipper to renew your e25 monoknife carry permit. This came up in our game just last week. Someone broke into my apt. And tried to access my computer for incriminating information. We caught her and she though she had me over a barrel. She knew from her source that I wasn't going to kill her so she was all smug. So I picked up the phone and dialed 911. Everyone's jaw dropped. No one, ref included, had thought of that. Remember, 'punks straddle the line. Just cos they spend a lot of time on the wrong side doesn't meant they have to stay there.

5. Public transport (Dave Brohman)
Use the subway. Everyone keeps suggesting that making a getaway on public transport is a bad thing. Not so. A subway is a really good place to get lost in the crowd. Plus, they can't run your plates or I.D. your vehicle.

> Guard: "They got away sir."
> Boss: "What did their vehicle look like?"
> Guard: "About 40 feet long, seats 60, 'Night City Transit Authority' written on the side..."

6a. Low profile
When your on a mission or if you've got something to hide (like having a body in the trunk of your car), don't do something stupid like speeding or driving under the influence. Even if you get off with only a ticket, that ticket might be enough to connect you to the crime. Also, don't get into fights and when a cop/guardsman tells you to do something, say "yes sir" and play the concerned citizen. Don't overdo it though. An overly helpful person gets remembered as much as a troublemaker.

6b. (Craig L Wigda)
If you have expensive/military/or hard to get gear, do not flash it around. People would just love to take things away from you if they can.

7. Bugs (Craig L Wigda)
Always check provided gear/safe houses for bugs.

8. Shooting cops (Blank Dave)
Don't shoot at the police (it makes them mad, and this point can never be overstated enough).

9. Keywords/phrases
These were already mentioned in the combat section but they can also be useful in other situations. The party should have a short list of subtle signs, with meanings like:
"Something is wrong, try to leave unobtrusively."
"Get ready for a fight."
"Get ready to run like hell."

10a. Planning
When you're making a plan, _always_ make a backup plan for when things go wrong (which, let's face it, they always do). So don't just say: "We're going to sneak into the temple, steal the Ruby Eye of the Mad God, and then sneak back out again", but also decide in advance what you're going to do if you get discovered halfway and you've got hordes of mad priests and guards coming towards you from all directions, while bells madly toll the alarm. My group usually starts arguing, with half the players wanting to make a run for it and the other half wanting to go on and try for the Eye anyway. Of course, while we're arguing our DM happily lets the guards and priests close in.

10b.
In general, try to keep plans simple. You can't plan for every contingency anyway and having too many/too long/too detailed plans only ensures that things will get messed up, not to mention the fact that they suck up a lot of game-time.

10c. (Sander Biesma)
Whenever you decide to make a plan, stick to it. Just because you discover a hidden door which might hide a load of treasure (and your usual Fiend or two) that doesn't give reason enough to sidestep from your original plan and screw it up completely, making your original goal harder to achieve.

* 11. Unknown territory
When heading into unknown territory, try to get information beforehand if you can. Try to find out about weather and terrain conditions, monsters you might encounter, local leaders, customs the people might have, laws of nature, laws of supernature, etc.

12. The real deal (Dave Brohman)
Ask questions FIRST, shoot later. So many punks accept the line they are fed without bothering to check the facts. Get your employers line, then visit your local information sources and find out the REAL deal.

13. Mr. Johnson (Craig L Wigda)
Always check out your job and the person hiring you before you take the job (but most GMs do not allow you the chance to do this). Never trust the equipment provided by Mr. Johnson.

14. Coffins (Gary Astleford)
Don't open coffins. Only stupid people open coffins.

15. Navigating buildings (D Howard)
One of the best survival techniques is if you run into a building to evade capture NEVER head upwards, through yes, but never up because it's a lot harder to get back down again!

16. Portable phones
If your character carries a portable phone, make sure the sound is turned off before you go on a mission requiring stealth.

17. Meetings
Never let the other party chose the place for the meeting. Make sure it's held somewhere public and unenclosed, such as a mall. If you need more privacy, try to meet somewhere in the open, a public park for instance. That way, it's harder for your enemy to box you in. Always arrive at the meeting place early and spend some time observing it. Note the available exits. During the meeting, have some backup waiting (preferably with a getaway vehicle and a long range rifle).

18. Mugshots
Before going on an assignment, try to get pictures or descriptions of people important to your mission. My own group once went to talk to a scientist without taking this precaution. The person we met later turned out to be a very well-armed imposter [ouch].

19. Payment
When accepting a mission, try to get as much money in advance as possible. Not only does this reduce the chances of being cheated, it also makes it less likely that your employer will try to stab you in the back in order to avoid having to pay you. Don't forget to ask if your expenses (hospital

costs, ammo, broken equipment etc.) are covered. Also, make sure that those surviving will receive the shares of deceased teammembers.

20. Traces
Be careful not to leave traces at the scene of the crime. You might want to invest in some gloves, a disguise or perhaps even some spells specifically designed to clear all traces. These can be extremely handy, especially in Shadowrun, where even a single drop of blood or strand of hair is enough for a ritual magic team to track you down. Also remember that a lot of firearms eject empty cartridges, which might be used for evidence.

21. Dealing with the Mob (Blank Dave)
Don't wave sexual apperatus at the local mafia Don (we learnt that through experience).

22. Boltholes (Craig L Wigda)
Have more then one bolt hole or safe house with some extra gear, cash, and fake IDs.

* 23. Intrusion
While (or before) trespassing through a fortress/dungeon/corporate building, see if you can pick up an appropriate outfit/suit that will allow you to blend in. Also, pay attention to the names of high-ranking personnel (again, try to find this out beforehand if possible). That way, when someone stops you and asks you what the hell you're doing in the Inner Citadel carrying the Scepter of Urgh, you'll be able to say: "I've got direct orders from lord X, out of my way, you flunky." This will probably not be enough to get you out of trouble, but it should keep the guards from attacking you on the spot and thus buy you some time.

* 24. 'To do' list (Lauri C. Gardner)
Make a list of all things you are supposed to do, especially the dumb things. If you don't mention them, you will forget them. Have the list go around having rest of the team members make additions.

* 25. Some advice for thieves (Barry Wood)
[AD&D] If you detect traps, do NOT assume just because you have a "Remove Traps" roll after the "Detect" that you are somehow responsible for removing each and every trap. Even at medium levels, the odds of you failing your roll and being killed by a trap are high. So, let the mage spend some spells removing it. Let the fighter use his polearm to poke around a bit. The best thief I ever ran with would go to the front of the party and say "Yep, there's a trap here" and then promptly return to his place in back of the party.

* 26. Animals
Keep a sharp eye and ear on the local fauna. When something is wrong, the animals often know about it before you do. An unusually quiet forest or a flock of birds that suddenly takes off for no apparent reason could both indicate trouble. You might also want to consider giving your character a trained dog or another animal with sharp senses.

Well, that's it for now. My thanks go out to the following people whose suggestions made it into the list in one form or another:

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