How Is It Better?

Ultimately this is the only question that matters. Of course, when it comes to D&D there are so many different varieties it is hard to say anything which won't be contradicted by one version or another so I am just going to haphazardly blanket them all. Here are the highlights.

A Better Class System

In Dragonhead there are three different kinds of classes: Existences, Callings and Transformations. You can go with just one of them or multi-class and tack a few onto your character. This combines Race As Class with Race/Class and all without the tangled mess which tends to surround multi-classing. If you want to play a Dwarf you can do just that and take it to as high a level as you want. You could also play a Dwarf/Cleric or a Dwarf/Rogue or even a Dwarf/Cleric/Rogue.

Customizable Classes. The game contains a way for DMs to create new classes from scratch. And it's not rocket science! A point value called Vitae is given to different class attributes, you add them together and the total tells you what XP-based level advancement scheme to use. The more a class provides a character (like the classic B/X Elf) the harder it becomes to advance.

Better Checks

Simplicity is an important part of the game, not just for the players but also the DM. The character sheet is uncluttered. Skills largely come from your class. When an ability check is asked for, the DM is only obliged to ask for an ability. It is left to the players to know what their class can do and bring it into play.

Risk Rolling

When you make a check you do not just roll 1d20 and succeed or fail. You have the choice of making a low risk 3d6 roll, a medium risk 2d10 roll or a high risk 1d20 roll. The greater the risk you take the greater your chances are of landing a spectacular success as well as a stunning defeat.

This gives players more control over the outcome of an action as well as more credit for taking it. If you choose to roll a 1d20 and it rolls high – that is something you did for the character – you went out on a limb and you own that roll.

Strength & Success

All too often in D&D you roll the d20 - a 14 turns up - and a new player will ask, "what's a 14? What does that mean?" D&D has never had a good answer for this. It doesn't even have a name for that number. It's just what you rolled. It doesn't mean anything.

In Dragonhead what you roll is the *strength of your action*, or simply "your strength" (And yes, the ability Strength has been changed to Muscle to keep the two from being confused). It is a measure of how good your character did in performing the action at hand.

Successes are a 4 point gradation of that strength which amplifies the outcome of the action. If you did a good job rolling the dice, you are rewarded for it! Your attacks will do more damage and your spells will be more potent.

Simple Answers to Complex Things

The Adventure section is chock full of simple streamlined ways to handle difficult situations. Grappling is a breeze. How much damage does a fall do? One hit point per foot fallen. Damage type is determined by what you land on.

Maybe that is not as simplistic as "roll 1d6 per 10' fallen" but it is more realistic and less of a hassle when

a rope bridge gives way and sends a few dozen characters and creatures plunging into the valley below.

Better Combat

Initiative – who goes first – has been a thorn in the side of gaming from the very start. Dragonhead has two forms of combat, basic combat which is for small fights and battle combat for large skirmishes.

With basic combat, which is how most fights start, people declare what their characters are going to do, dice are rolled simultaneously and whoever produces the greatest hit strength goes first. There is no initiative roll in basic combat. Smooth and fluid, combat just happens.

In a battle, each side presents a leader who makes a charisma check and the side whose leader has the greatest charisma strength takes command of the battlefield. That side goes first and the fight goes side by side until it's over.

Better Hit Points

Damage is recorded as wear and tear. Wear is exhaustion while tear is actual damage. Sharp weapons cause more tear damage than blunt ones, thus solving the age old problem of how a dagger and a club can do the same amount of damage despite the dagger being far more dangerous than a club.

When it comes to monster hit points the numbers have been kept low to remain backwards compatible with older modules. Character hit points are stat-based. Instead of gaining yet another roll of the hit die with each level, your ability scores increase by a point and those scores determine the number of hit points you have. The end result is that characters start at 1st level with far more hit points than usual but they do not gain hit points quite so dramatically as they climb through the levels.

Why do this? Because new players often begin with a first level character on a level 1-3 adventure not knowing that these are some of the toughest modules to play because the characters are so frail. Meanwhile adventures of levels 9-12 may not be the easiest but they do tend to be the most tedious thanks to the exorbitant amounts of hit points involved.

Stat-based hit points will hopefully bring the matter of adventure levels back to what everyone expected them to be in the first place with low-level adventures being easy to play and high-level adventures being the most challenging.

Better Magic

Spell splots? Vancian Magic? Not in Dragonhead. If you know how to cast a spell then you can cast it over and over as much as you like. But casting magic is no simple or safe affair. Abuse your powers and it will eventually catch up to you.

Spell levels now make sense. Magic-Users can try to cast any spell they acquire, but the greater the spell level the harder it will be to cast that spell.

The spells themselves are pieces of equipment. You don't simply get spells as you level up. You need to acquire what you cast, whether that be paying for them, finding the pages in a treasure trove, or stealing them outright. Likewise, spell books are important. Lose your spell book and it won't be long before you forget how to cast your spells.

Real Actions

What truly separates Role Playing Games from other games (or at least should imho) is the nature of the rules. With a board game the rules are there to tell you what you can or cannot do. With an RPG your character should be able to

do anything you can imagine the character doing within reason. Outside of reason? That's what the dice and the rules are for. So a lot of emphasis has been put on creating rules that capture what would actually happen if it all were real. The idea is quite simple. Our imaginations are geared towards dealing with reality. If you want to engage people's imagination, give them something real or at least realistic to chew on.

Innumerable Small Details

And a ton of other small yet notable fixes, such as...

- A copper-coin based economy

- Easy to understand movement.

- Simple encumbrance with hard values for armor and shield

- Two number AC for when your guard is up and when you've been caught by surprise.

- A greater importance given to languages

- No long sprawling back-stories for new characters.

- Characters that are created in minutes.

- Levels that increase XP at a better rate

- When you die the next character you roll up may be one level less than the one you just lost.

- And much much more.

And It's Not Done Yet!

Once a game has been laid out into nice looking books and artists hired to give it nice looking looks – that is the frosting on a cake. The cake itself had better be baked because there is no changing it without launching into a new version.

Right now Dragonhead may not be anything to look at but it is still in a state where changes can be made. Read it over and if you find something in it that needs to be changed – tell me about it – don't wait until after its done. I won't want to hear about it then.

Now is the time to act.

Give it a look.

Tell me what you think.

www.jdmcdonnell.com/dragonhead