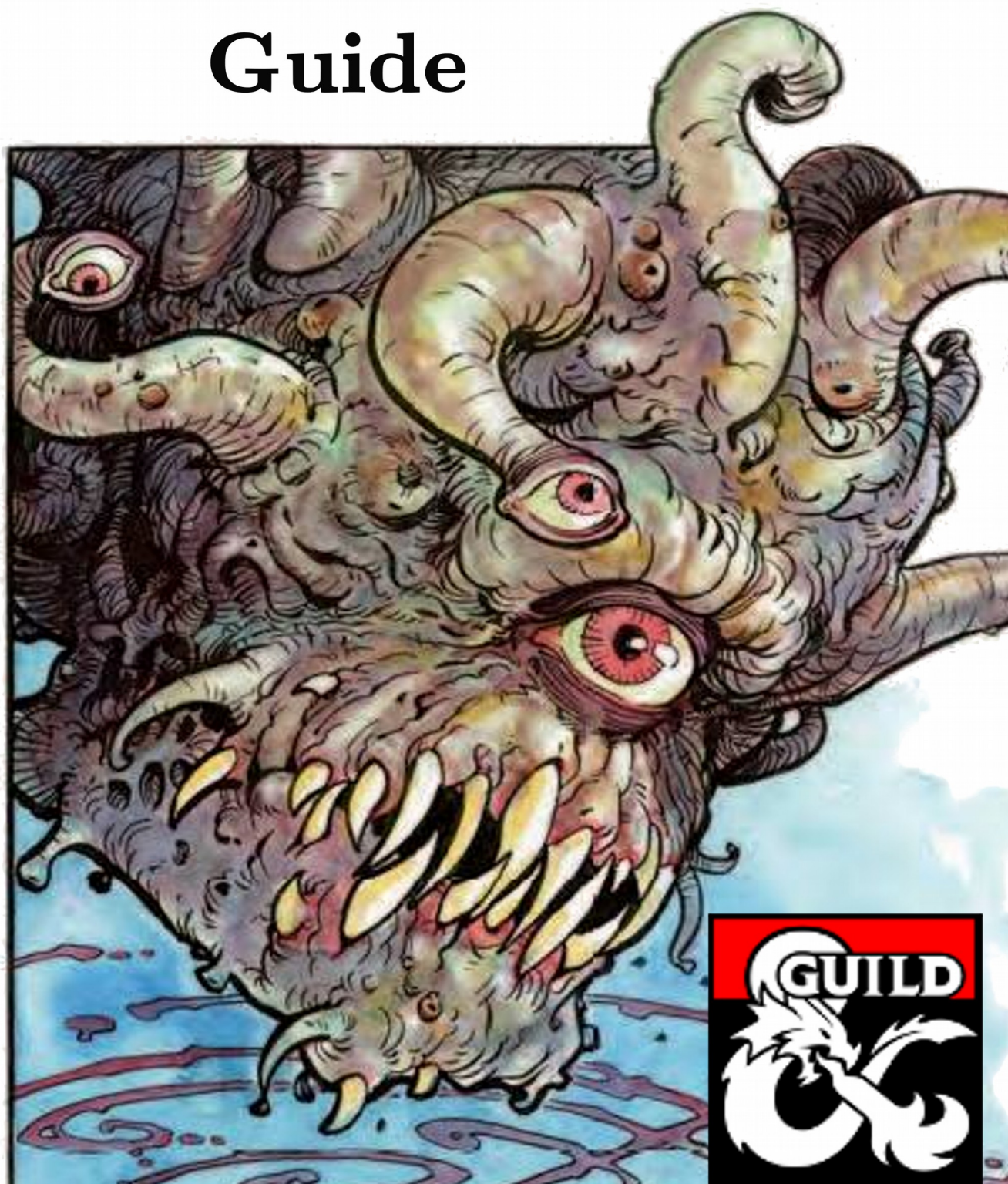# The Dungeon Master's Self Defense Guide

The Dungeon Master's Self Defense Guide

Strategies and tactics for dealing with difficult, overpowered or game breaking players.

by Jason Kramer

Introduction

The role of a Dungeon Master is a complicated one. Unlike other games Dungeons and Dragons utilizes a referee or Dungeon Master (DM) that has more than one function.

Story teller, referee, world builder, game master, narrator, rules interpreter …..the list goes on. The last thing a DM needs to deal with are difficult players.

Difficult players include players that are looking to break the game, push the boundaries or buttons of the DM or other players, players looking to over power others or simply players that don't play well with others.

In presenting this information I must first state that for me personally Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) is ALL about fun. My personal definition of D&D is a group of friend around a table having fun. My core mechanic as a DM is fun first and foremost.

This being stated it is necessary on occasion for a DM to defend themselves against exploitative players. In other words to show "Tough love" to the players at the table. By tough love I am referring to more than just "Playing it rough" "Being dirty" or being "A vengeful DM".

There are times when players will attempt to take advantage of a DM or another player repeatedly. There are times when a table begins to get out of control and the DM must lay down the law (Which is ultimately to preserve FUN!).

Nothing will have players leave your table as a DM quicker than trying to kill your player's characters or insult them personally. THIS IS NOT A DM REVENGE GUIDE!

This is a DM self defense guide which aims **to tactfully** deal with problem players.

My definition of strategy is the philosophy or mental aspect on which an action is based. The actual act of a physical action to accomplish an end is a tactic. To use a quick example to illustrate the difference between a strategy and a tactic:

> A player has an attack that is over powered (OP). A strategy for dealing with an OP player would be to hinder their ability to use that attack at full power or at all. A tactic that could be used would be to present the player with a situation that requires a saving roll to be preformed before they attack that uses their least developed ability (Which will have the lowest modifier to add to the saving roll).

There are many different ways for the DM to exert control in a game. Part of what defines the difference between a professional DM and an amateur DM is HOW they exert this control.

This guide is written specifically to arm DM's with creative, humorous and (Mostly) tactful ways of exerting control over problematic players. First the guide examines types of problems and then provides "Tough love" solutions to those problems.

This guide allows Dungeon Master's of all levels to take back their table from troublesome players. Loaded with strategies, tactics, techniques and tools which DM's can use to *immediately* take control away from game breakers and other types of problem players.

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Say something first!

First and foremost when a Dungeon Master (DM) realizes during play that a player or players at the table are going to be troublesome to the adventure or game play at hand the DM has a responsibility to **verbally communicate** with the player(s).

The DM may wish to communicate directly with the player(s) during game play or take a break and approach the player(s) individually in a more private manner. This is solely up to the DM's discretion based on the game setting or the people at the table.

If the game is in a game shop or in a more formal setting approaching the player(s) privately during a break is recommended. If the game is in a more casual setting or with a group of close friends it **may** be OK to address the issues or concerns at the table during the game.

The DM should verbally communicate their concerns to the player(s). Whether the concern is that a player is over powered, playing in a game breaking way, playing rules differently than the DM plays the rules, is being rude or inconsiderate to other players or the DM etc...

When speaking to the player make sure to utilize a calm demeanor with a focus on a soft (but firm) voice. Avoid standing squared off the player by placing your nose, shoulder, hips and toes pointing off the the side of the player. Make eye contact but don't give the player the "Cthulhu death gaze" or "1000 yard stare". This is a first warning for the player to correct their behavior or actions.

Bring up your concern(s) to the player. Calmly present yourself and your argument. **Make sure to use an in game example of what the player did and what your concerns are.**

After presenting your argument make sure to listen intently to everything the player(s) have to say. **Do not cut the player off – let them finish what they are saying!**

Nod your head up and down and pay active attention to what the player is saying. After hearing the player out then try to come to terms or reach an agreement on what has to happen for everyone to be happy.

If after approaching the player you have come to terms and the player continues to utilize poor behavior or plays the game in a problematic way then further actions must be taken.

This is **NOT** a guide on verbal etiquette or how to politely relate to others. There are many guides on this subject online and if verbally relating to players is an issue than please seek these other sources out. My guide on Secret Tactics for Dungeon Master's at the dmsguild.com deals with this type of subject matter.

This **IS** a guide for Dungeon Master's that have player(s) that are over powered, game breaking or just play the game in way that makes the Dungeon Master feel like they are are being taken advantage of or otherwise mistreated by "Game play hackers" **and the DM does not understand how to defend themselves from these types of player(s) or people.**

Perspective is everything.

Perspective or the internal thoughts and feelings that we have towards something or someone are very powerful things.

It is necessary at times to change our perspective to internally view things that are happening outside of ourselves in a way that creates an advantage for ourselves.

One perspective that is powerful and worth considering is to view the problem player(s) at the the table as a personal challenge. The challenge that presents itself is an opportunity for us to grow in knowledge and power as DM's.

Don't take the player(s) being problematic as a personal affront. Instead take it as a challenge to grow. When viewed from this perspective the problem player(s) are actually being like a friend.

Like a friend? Yes-the problem player is like a friend in that they are pointing out your weaknesses or areas that you need to develop. A friend will tell you things that you don't always want to hear or deal with. In the same way those who oppose us are like friends in that they point out areas that we need to continue developing.

Tough Love Perspective.

Another perspective to consider is that in correcting or dealing with problem player(s) that the DM is **not** there to be a character killer, vengeful DM or "Dirty DM".

Instead the perspective to embrace is like that of a parent exercising "tough love" with a child or a family member dealing with another family member. The players sitting around the table are in many ways like a family. Without the players there is no need for a DM!

This guide presents DM's with a way to arm themselves with strategies and tactics in a **tactful** way.

By embracing the perspectives of taking problems as a way to grow and in taking tactful action utilizing tough love instead of vulgarity or some other forceful means of conflict the Dungeon Master is able to reclaim control of the game and the table in way where everyone wins.

An Iron Fist in Velvet Glove.

The expression above is another way of saying be firm and be polite. In other words: Be tactful!

To be able to deal with difficult players tactfully it is first necessary to familiarize yourself with some techniques and tools in how to present yourself in a non offensive manner.

Stopping problematic players from spiraling out of control in D&D is a bit different than a sport where a referee blows a whistle and calls a foul against the player(s) for breaking the rules.

World building, scene setting and narration responsibilities of the DM coupled with D&D being a game that is highly based on verbal communication skills presents some unique challenges.

Be aware of your environment!

First and foremost remain aware of your environment. A DM that is not aware or otherwise focused on something other than the table and the players are setting themselves up to be preyed upon by players looking to take advantage.

A useful tool for all DM's is to police the area or setting in and around the table of play for things that can cause distractions. In a game shop this is quite a task but by taking control of something whether it is telling a player to step out when they use their phone or to lower the background music volume demonstrates to the players at the table that you are not only paying attention but these little things also can exert a subconscious level of control which aids the DM.

Don't be afraid to arrange the seats differently, move the table or take some kind of other action in the surrounding or direct environment to exert control. Involve the players in these actions.

While engaged as a DM make sure to make eye contact with the current player(s) that are playing. Nodding your head up and down (As if to signal "Yes") to let them know you are actively listening and paying attention.

Moving the DM screen out away from you and more towards the other players allows your peripheral vision to increase so that you are able to pick up on more things visually while you have your head down figuring out stats etc… is also very useful.

It isn't what you say...

It isn't what you say it's how you say it! We have all heard this expression before. To DM's this is especially true. How a DM presents themselves verbally to another player is the difference between a tactful DM and a hurtful DM.

A professional DM pays attention to the volume level of their voice and the forcefulness of breathing that accompanies it. There is difference between raising the voice to communicate over background noise and yelling.

The moment yelling occurs communication is no longer taking place. If a player starts yelling they can often be calmed down by a DM using a calm voice that states to them "Maybe I don't understand can you explain this to me please?

Always allow a player to finish their statement. This is especially true with problematic players for two reasons. The first is that they may get even more offended and angry at being cut off. Second allowing them to finish allows you as the DM to have even more potentially useful information to use against them.

Again the aim of any punitive action or corrective action by the DM against or toward a player(s) should not be seen as personal or vengeful.

One way to avoid people taking things personal is to address the whole group. Make sure to look at everyone equally and don't just focus your eye contact on one person while speaking.

To avoid creating a vengeful feeling or response make sure to **calmly explain** your reasoning for doing what your doing to the problematic player(s).

If a player does not respond to "Calm reason" then the DM needs to consider if they are sound enough mentally and emotionally to continue gaming.

Sometimes players come in and use their character to vent hostilities and suppressed emotions that have been accumulating. Most game shops have a rules banner on display which usually includes a rule against passive aggressive behaviors being expressed by their "Characters".

Even if you are playing a home setting it doesn't hurt to put up a printed out version of rules. Rules are designed to insure fairness for everyone and a player that agrees to them before playing is forced to admit they agreed to certain terms.

One for you. One, Two for me.

Ever seen anyone pull the card dealing trick where they say out loud "One for you" as they deal you a card and then "One, Two for me" as they deal themselves two cards?

Seems silly right? How could a person not realize the dealer is dealing themselves two cards instead of one? Because they are dealing to a person who is not paying total attention to what they are doing or the game at hand.

Cheating happens. Cheaters rely on misdirection of person's attention. One type of cheating is the dice role cheat. The most common type of dice role cheat is the "Show you the dice" cheat.

Dice Cheating:

This cheat involves the cheater doing things. First they look at the dice after the roll and spot a high number towards the top of the die. Second as they pick up the dice to show the DM or other people present at the table they carefully roll the die ever so slightly to the high number and show that number instead of the real die roll.

Take out a D20. Roll it and then take a moment to spot the highest numbers towards the top. Then carefully pick up the dice in a way where you slightly roll the dice over and present it as if you were the cheater. Do this several times so you can see for yourself what it looks like and how easily it can be done.

To prevent this cheat the DM should casually insist that none of the players at the table pick up the dice to show them or another player the resulting number.

The next type of die cheat to be on the look out for is the "Loaded Die" cheat. While most people think of loaded die as always rolling high they can also be loaded to always roll low thus "sandbagging" or crippling the roller.

There are two types of loaded dice. One is a standard die with a small hole bored into a number on the other side of the desired number. These are often hand made and what gives them away is that they consistently roll the same number repeatedly.

To spot this type of dice watch for the obvious same number roll repeating or a player that switches to different (but always the same dice) whenever an important roll is needed. Upon visual examination the hole can usually be spotted.

The second type of loaded dice is the fabricated loaded die. These dice are less obvious as they are made for cheating and don't use edge weights but a weight that is slightly off center.

What gives these dice away is that they are designed to always roll to favor one hemisphere of the dice. This hemisphere or die half has a large number of high numbers on it.

By having most of the large numbers on one half of the dice it ensures a high number without always being the same number thus avoiding detection. Visual inspection gives away that there are to many high numbers on one side.

Keep an eye out for player(s) using Magic The Gathering spin down dice!

A tactful DM never accuses a person of cheating. Instead the tactful DM immediately removes the players ability to continue to cheat!
The key to being a tactful DM is to act quietly instead of speaking loudly!

If a cheater is detected or cheating with dice is suspected the DM should have all players roll into the middle of the table where all players can see the dice. They are not allowed to touch the dice. If loaded die are suspected then the DM should state that the player needs to use regulation dice and immediately present the player with new dice.

ALL DM's should always carry at least one extra "safe" set of dice for others to use. Additionally having a "Roll Box" or some other community roll container is recommended.

Modifier Cheating:

This one of those areas where a DM should be not be quick to accuse anyone of cheating as we all have made mistakes adding up modifiers or adding in the wrong modifier (Such as adding a proficiency bonus to the hit roll AND the damage roll).

Modifier cheating entails taking advantage of a DM that is either distracted or not familiar with a certain class or race ability or even character level.

Once a player realizes the DM doesn't know what should be happening SOME players will start adding numbers in to boost their modifiers.

The most useful tool to avoid this type of cheating or even to correct players that are making legitimate mistakes is for the DM to have a player character statistic sheet which they go over at the beginning of EVERY session with the players. More information on this statistic sheet will be presented shortly.

For people using tablets and phone application character sheets make sure to visually double check their statistics and work through the numbers.

One free and often used phone app character sheet does not automatically add constitution modifiers to the players hit point total. Double check "E-Player" stats.

Sometimes the apps malfunction or players enter the wrong value. Visually inspecting and working through the numbers on paper character sheets is also advised as people can sometimes make mistakes.

Complacency Cheating:

Complacency cheating falls right in line with modifier cheating in that it involves players taking advantage of a DM that is not aware, knowledgeable or properly focused on the game at hand.

The definition of a complacent person is a person who is overly content. This lends itself to over confidence and not paying attention enough to details.

There is an old saying that states complacency kills. Most traffic accidents occur for this reason within two miles of home. While complacency can actually kill a person in the real world it can also kill a DM in the fantasy world!

Complacency cheats include players that magic users adding and using spells that are not on their spell lists. Players using multiple different magic items instead of obeying the rule of a limit of three magic items.

Another example are players switching weapons in the middle of battle without stating they are switching or magic users using two spells back to back either through a mistake or on purpose because the DM is not paying attention or even bothering to ask the player is that second magical action a spell or cantrip? Can there character class or level even take a second action or bonus action?

As with modifier cheats, complacency cheats are all about players taking advantage of a DM that is not focused on the game or worse, feigning they know exactly what the players are and are not able to do.

Knowing everything is not important. Knowing where to find those things is! Consult the Dungeon Master's Guide or use an online reference site like a D&D wiki or roll20.net/compendium.

It never hurts to ask a player something that you as the DM already know. Two good reasons for doing this are: It involves the player in the game and the information the player gives (Correct, truthful or otherwise) can be gaged.

The best defense a DM has against these types of cheats is to use a player statistic data sheet which is updated at the beginning of every gaming session.

A sample character player data sheet is included at the end of this guide. Just like this guide it is printer friendly. There are many other types of player character data sheets available at the dmsguild.com. It doesn't matter which data sheet you use – JUST USE ONE!

Time for some tough love!

The term "Tough love" is used on purpose to convey the difference when employing these self defense actions on player(s). There is a difference between tough love and being spiteful, vengeful or purposefully hurtful.

The difference is tough love is a conscious action directed to correcting and improving a person's character or performance whereas other forms of punitive or corrective action are done (Un)consciously to injure or otherwise impair a person's character or performance.

With this in mind let's proceed to the part of this guide that provides a DM tools to lay a smack down on problematic players.

Humorous Handicapping: Quirks!

Note the word humorous. Humor is being used here as a deception to hide the weapon which is the quirk.

By being humorous a quirk provides a comical edge to game play while the quirk provides the silent slap to the player character's bottom.

These quirks are not just about humor but also specifically designed to inhibit and make problems for the problem player.

First let's look at the player's class breaking down the driving desire or motivation behind each class. The class a player chooses has a lot to do with the qualities each class has to offer. These qualities will now be weaponized and used against the problem player.

The 12 Basic Classes:

CLASS:	MOTIVATION:
Barbarian	Battle
Bard	Attention
Cleric	Healer, Health
Druid	Harmony
Fighter	Battle
Monk	Battle
Paladin	Righteousness
Ranger	Harmony
Rogue	Criminal, Covert
Sorcerer	Power
Warlock	Power
Wizard	Power

By understanding the driving desire behind each class a player plays that desire can be made a problem by creating a quirk to counter the players motivation for playing that class.

Motivation/Quirk Base Chart:

MOTIVATION:	Quirk Base:
Battle	Fear, Cowardice
Attention	Shyness
Healer	Hurtful, Damaging
Harmony	Strife, Separation
Battle	Fear, Cowardice
Battle	Fear, Cowardice
Righteousness	Vulgarity
Harmony	Strife, Separation
Criminal	Lawfulness, Overt
Power	Inept, Futility
Power	Inept, Futility
Power	Inept, Futility

The Motivation/Quirk Base Chart above is provided as reference. If you have better motivations and there opposites to use as a quirk base by all means utilize it. The idea is simple enough to follow. Identify the players motivation and counter it by creating a "Quirk Base" that is the exact opposite.

A Quirk Base is base or foundation upon which to build or craft the actual quirk around. The chart below is provided for reference. As some of the Quirk Bases are the same please note that duplicates have been removed. Again if your personally constructed material is better – USE IT! *In fact I encourage you to create your own charts.*

Class/Quirk Base/Quirk Chart:

Class:	Quirk Base:	Quirk
Barbarian, Fighter, Monk	Fear, Cowardice	Seized with fear disadvantage on all attacks. Cowardice - runs away, provokes opportunity attack. In battle freezes– stunned one round.
Bard	Shyness	Fear of singing looses voice – disadvantage on spells. Shyness – disadvantage on charisma saving rolls.
Cleric	Hurtful, Damaging	When trying to heal causes more quirks. Healing spells/cantrips – healing does xDx damage instead of heal.
Druid, Ranger	Strife, Separation	chaos quirk – player(s) have disadvantage on all rolls for 1D4 turns
Paladin	Vulgarity	Quirk that involves vulgarity such as loud flatulence in public settings.
Rogue	Lawfulness, Overt	Unable to lie, sneezes when using stealth.
Sorcerer, Warlock, Wizard	Inept, Futility	Unable to concentrate- disadvantage on all spell attack rolls.

Class Primary Abilities

Each class has a primary focus on an ability. Some classes are able to choose from more than one ability. To know the which ability your players have focused on make sure to use a player data sheet.

Once armed with this information the DM is able to utilize additional throttling tactics to each of the players utilizing their class Primary Ability focus.

Class Primary Ability Chart:

Strength	Barbarian, Fighter, Paladin
Charisma	Bard, Paladin, Sorcerer, Warlock
Wisdom	Cleric, Druid, Monk, Ranger
Dexterity	Monk, Fighter, Rogue, Ranger
Intelligence	Wizard

The chart above provides a very interesting insight into a **vulnerability** that all classes have. Look at the chart again. Have you figured it out? Hint: What ability is missing? You guessed it: Constitution!

In addition to a quirk we now have the idea of a vulnerability that can be exploited. For the players trying to exploit the DM's kindness, fairness, sense of fun (Hopefully not the DM's complacency!) the DM now has a way to exploit something to hinder or correct the problem player.

Before jumping into the strategies and tactics of the Constitution exploit let finish our examination of Class Primary Abilities strategies and tactics.

To create a Quirk Base for something simply find out what it's opposite is. The difference is expressed simply enough in the idea of synonym and an antonym. Once the Quirk Base is created then go about creating quirks. Keep in mind that using humor helps disguise or "soften" the blow so that players are not as likely to be *personally* offended.

Class Primary Quirk Base Chart:

Barbarian, Fighter, Paladin	Strength	Weakness, Impotence
Bard, Paladin, Sorcerer, Warlock	Charisma	Repulsive, Offensive
Cleric, Druid, Monk, Ranger	Wisdom	Indiscretion, Foolishness
Monk, Fighter, Rogue, Ranger	Dexterity	Clumsiness, Inept
Wizard	Intelligence	Foolish, Witless

Later in this guide quirks are provided in detail for DM's to use in their game settings to keep problem players in check. For the time being let's move on to the constitution exploit.

Fatigue Makes cowards of us all
The Constitution Exploit:

All classes suffer this exploit though not all player's character will. Some players will develop their constitution ability. Check your player data sheet to know which players have good constitution modifiers.

Constitution is the ability to endure hardship. It has been stated "Fatigue makes cowards of us all" in relation to combat oriented activities. This statement is true in Dungeons and Dragons as well!

In D&D the Constitution Ability has a relationship to Hit Points the Character has. So if a character stumbles upon a magic ring of Constitution +1 they then add 1 Hit Point per level to their maximum number of Hit Points allowed. Thus a tenth level character would add +10 to their Hit Points. **This idea also works in reverse.**

Be an EQUAL OPPURTUNITY DM!

It is absolutely important to remember to not to REPEATEDLY slam one player in the party. There are times to slam everyone so that no ONE person feels singled out or alienated.

Necrotic damage is one type of damage that forces a constitution saving throw. Use it against the troublesome players. The creature has a magic item, a staff with 1D6 charges of Necrotic damage for example. Or utilize an adventure plot twist where a disease is present and infecting creatures with a flesh rotting or necrotic attack claw or bite attacks. Or perhaps an infection is causing Necrotic magic attacks from magic user's that requires a constitution saving throw.

The Dragon's Blood Ale Challenge.

No player wants to turn down a simple drinking challenge at a bar! A great way to introduce quirks into a game and/or handicap a player with a constitution disadvantage (At least temporarily) is to challenge them with drinking Dragon's Blood Ale.

Once the players drink the ale they are then subject to 1: A constitution saving throw (With disadvantage as they have not drank this exact ale before) and 2: The players then roll to find out what quirk their character inherits from the consumption of the ale (As it is Dragon's Blood!).

What a bummer if a bar brawl take place after the player(s) have failed their constitution saving roll after drinking the Ale!

It doesn't have to be Dragon's Blood Ale. It can be any fluid the DM chooses. However the title and curiosity that Dragon's Blood Ale creates is often to much for players to resist!

Cursed Item Checks.

As a DM take note of who your players deal with magic items. Do they ALWAYS check to see if the item is cursed or do they just assume it will be fine. If they assume it will be fine and don't take time to magically identify the items then this is perfect time for them to find a cursed item.

If the party ALWAYS checks magic items with magical inspections for cursed items there is ANOTHER way to use this against them.

Curse without cursing:

A *sentient* weapon is a way to curse someone even though they have magically checked the item for a curse. They checked for a curse NOT a sentient weapon. Big difference. Technically the sentient weapon is creating impulses or taking over as another mind or intelligence. It is not a cursed item even though it may cause the player to act in certain way that may be detrimental to themselves.

How to DM Sentient Weapons.

Sentient weapons are similar to Non Playing Characters (NPC's) in that they have their own statistic blocks that include abilities very much like a characters.

The moment the player's character picks up a Sentient Weapon they are forced to make a saving throw to resist the sentient or intelligent nature of the weapon.

Most often the saving throw to be made will be Wisdom, Intelligence or Charisma based. For the troublesome player make sure to use their lowest modified statistic (Often Constitution) as the save to be made.

If the player fails the saving throw the weapon will then exert it's influence on the player. Sentient weapons are like single minded NPC's in that they have one major goal or objective that they are after or wish to accomplish.

Some pregame planning will have to go into the finding a sentient weapon. First consult the character(s) statistic sheet and decide what ability or modifier of the problem player needs to be put in check or brought back into balance.

Then use the player's class, primary ability or an alignment inversion (Described later in this guide) as a means to handicap the problem player. Once a course of action has been decided on by the DM then the Sentient Weapon's focus becomes what will cause a problem for the player in a way that balances the problem player.

Sentient weapons are like an urge. No different than the urge to eat or the desire to scratch a poison ivy rash. Any time a situation presents itself that can be of use or exploited by the sentient weapon the DM will force rolls on the player's character (Though the DM rolls for the Sentient weapon).

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A selfish Wizard has grabbed a beautiful bejeweled dagger out of a chest of coins. The wizard checked specifically with magic to see if the item is cursed before grabbing it.

The item is not cursed it is however sentient. The sentient item is asleep or slumbering until grasped which makes it even more difficult to detect (High DC results).

The moment the wizard grasps the dagger the DM has the player make a constitution check (As this represents the character's ability to withstand the sentience contained in the weapon). Or the DM can have the player make a check against their lowest modifier score.

The wizard has grasped a dagger that creates delusions of grandeur. Anytime the wizard is presented with situation involving choices of power or the use of power the wizard has a fit of delusions of grandeur.

During the episodes or fits of delusions the wizard is forced by the DM (With disadvantage) to make saving throws as the wizards ability to concentrate is actively being interfered with. The result renders the wizard's spell casting ability immensely thus handicapping the troublesome wizard.

Hit Point Handicapping:

Ultimately the Constitution Exploit is a form of Hit Point Handicapping. Hit Point Handicapping can also be expressed in other ways which may or may not relate to Constitution ability impairment. One of these ways is the use of complex traps.

Complex Traps

Now we're really cooking with lard! Complex traps are traps that spring one after another. Each trap inside of a complex trap is designed to move the players forcefully and **involuntarily** into the next trap. This trap in turn forces the player(s) into the next trap all the while players are taking damage.

Mixing in constitution saving throws after the initial trap is sprung is where a DM begins to cross the threshold to being diabolical. Again it is important to keep in mind that this guide is about "Tough love" which is designed to persuade problem players to discontinue their ways.

It is not about being a vengeful DM or finding humorous ways to create a Total Party Kill (TPK) scenario. Complex traps are designed for Hit Point Handicapping.

Hit Point Handicapping involves the DM checking the players statistic sheets for the players Hit Point totals. The idea is to bring the players Hit Points down to a low level thus the ridiculous heroics go by the wayside and the players are forced to think about what they are doing and how they are playing. It is to **SLOW** players down **NOT KILL** them.

A good complex trap will have several key elements to it. Surprise is the first key element. The key to surprising the party is misdirection.

Have a painting that appears to be giving away clues to the story line on one wall and while the players are engaged studying the painting the wall they have there backs to suddenly slams them through the wall they are facing (With the painting). They all take double bludgeoning damage for being hit by one wall and being pushed through the other wall.

Other great distractions include having the players engaged in battle and falling through the floor (Their focus is on the creature). Or having the floor covered with a swarm of creatures making trap detection impossible. Chases are another great distraction to use.

After taking double bludgeoning damage they find themselves in water or some type of bog with mud. This hinders there movement and forces a constitution saving throw or ability check on the party or player (Especially heavily armored players).

Additionally spikes may be present which forces a dexterity saving throw on the player(s) forcing them to take at least some damage whether they succeed or not.

The second element is double damage and the third element should involve terrain hindering movement which forces a saving throw or ability check.

If the third element also incorporates more damage and additional saving throws or ability checks, so much the better!

Allow the players to believe that they have survived the worst of it so that they take healing potions etc….

As soon as they have some of their hit points back the DM then has a party of Kobolds or some other monster appropriate to the players level to attack.

The result of the attack is not to kill the players but bring their hit points back down. This is the fourth element.

When players have used up their reserves of healing and then take additional damage and find themselves low on hit points again the effect is that they now have to really play. ***In a sense a properly prepared complex trap gets players "real".***

There are many books and resources with clever traps in them. When selecting a trap to use make sure it has all four elements: Surprise, double damage, forced saving throw/ ability check that the player has the lowest modifier to and a second attack after the players heal to keep their hit points low.

Multi-stage Planning:

The responsibilities of a Dungeon Master include pregame planning. This is especially true of higher levels of game play. Along with higher levels of game play come more powerful player character that may have a multitude of abilities, magic items or several special proficiencies.

Using information from the player's character statistic notes the DM can then begin the process of forming a strategy to deal the problem player(s).

The DM Trap.
A strategy a DM can utilize during game play is to allow players to get away with things during one session. In other words create an environment where the players almost feel obligated to take advantage of the "Nice" or "Generous" DM. While this strategy is a little dangerous it allows the DM to KNOW EXACTLY what type of players they are dealing with at the table. Armed with this knowledge the second adventure session will not work out as well for the players!

Be prepared as a DM to nullify problem players over more than just one gaming session! The players are less likely to see it coming.

Covert information gathering.
When collecting information from the players to create or update your player character statistic information sheet ONLY ask the players what their highest modifiers are, their weapon(s) or spell(s) of choice are. Only ask about their Strengths. To gather what the player's characters lowest statistics are ask to see there character sheets (Or tablets or phones) to check something "real quick". Then target the low modifiers. Collecting information this way throws off the players from knowing that you have gotten their low scores as well.

An example of multi-stage planning: After collecting information about the player's character you realize that the player has a Passive Perception score of 21 and a dexterity modifier of +9. Looking at the player's class choice as a Rogue it becomes apparent the player has focused their intention on not being surprised (Hence the high Passive Perception score) and probably uses a ranged weapon and stealth or hiding techniques (Hence the high Dexterity modifier).

After playing an adventure session with the player you realize that they are playing in a way that designed to disrupt and/or break the game. The player is using their high ability scores to the DM's disadvantage.

Identify the ability that is being used by the player. Then take measures to nullify that ability by understanding how the ability works.

Passive Perception is 10 + the Wisdom modifier. Thus anything that affects the Wisdom ability score (Temporarily or otherwise) is going to lower their Passive Perception total.

But this player has a second high modifier that is being played by the character in such a way as to disrupt the game. The Dexterity modifier is targeted next.

The DM then decides on a course of action to hinder these abilities. A possible resolution may include a cursed ring of -3 intelligence to take care of the Wisdom Modifier (Passive Perception). To hinder the players Dexterity the DM decides to give the player a quirk that involves Sneezing. As it so happens the bouts of sneezing happen at the worst possible time making it nigh impossible for the Rogue to sneak up and surprise prey or even attack from a distance as the sneeze gives away his location.

Break the Game Breaker

Multi-stage planning is essential for breaking game breaker players. Game breaking players will have at least one one way of approaching situations. Whether it is the way they think and approach the challenges put in place by the DM or how they play their character against a creature **the game breaker will repeat the game breaking behavior.**

Part of being a DM is being a student. Not just to continuously learn new rules, classes and mechanics but also be a student of how players play the game.

Pay attention to the way a player is either: strategically approaching a problem in the game or how the player is attacking or utilizing their character weapons (Tactics) during play. The behavior the DM is looking for will be repetitive in nature.

Once the DM has figured out what or how the player is breaking the game the DM will need take time outside the game to figure out a counter tactic. Hence the need for a DM to be patient and allow for several sessions of game breaking play until they have the perfect resolution to stop the players behavior. This is the essence of Multi-stage planning.

Character alignment inversion.

Often overlooked a player's Alignment is highly exploitable. It is as simple as forcing the contrary or opposite onto the character. Once the character is playing contrary to their chosen Alignment the DM forces disadvantage rolls on them.

Whether it is a magic item that forces an inversion of the characters primary Alignment or a quirk it matters not.

The DM looks at the characters alignment. A problem player in the group in this example is a Paladin. The Paladin's Alignment is Lawful Good.

One way to precede might be during the adventure the DM leads the Paladin on with a story about how virtuous **returning** a stolen artifact is. The part to be revealed later by the DM is that the artifact 1: is cursed and 2: springs a complex trap when returned. Thus the DM has effectively used the character's alignment against them.

This simple artifact trap idea can be used against Evil (Truly evil) or Chaotic (Selfish) based characters. Instead of returning the stolen artifact they **steal** the artifact (Which is cursed and trapped) and in stealing it find out that they have been tricked they have done a great good.

Example: The artifact is actually imprisoning a powerful beneficent being (Angel etc...) which is now free to exert it's righteousness on the land. Of course the freed being is contrary to the player(s) alignment and causes them to be at a disadvantage in making their saving rolls and attack rolls against it.

The Crippling Difficulty Class Check.

A Difficulty Class or DC is a number that the DM assigns to a task in order to determine how difficult it is for the players to accomplish.

It is easy to create a DC that is impossible for the character(s) to attain. The result will always be failure and the player(s) will become angry and quickly frustrated with such a tactic.

Instead it is recommended to make the DC number unlikely but not impossible to attain. That is to say select a DC number based on the character(s) statistic sheet that would require the player to roll the highest number on the dice or die for them to succeed

Let's say a player has multi-classed their character so that they have been able to have an extremely high ability score and a ridiculous bonus modifier to add to their rolls.

After consulting the player statistic sheet the numbers show an ability score of 25 which yields a modifier of +7. Also taking into account the players Proficiency Modifier which is +6 (This is a Tier 4 - 17th level character).

Now we have a character at the table that adds +13 to whatever the result is on the dice. This would mean the character only needs to roll a 7 on a D20 (Twenty sided die) to make 20.

Armed with this knowledge the DM would add 15-20 to the players modifier result total to come up with a DC of 28-33 to succeed. **This allows the player a very small level of success but it is possible.**

The DM tells the character before they roll what the DC is before the player rolls. This is done to remain transparent or completely truthful to players. The DM is letting them know that is possible to succeed just highly unlikely.

If the players question the DM about why the DC is so high the DM should let the player know that there character is powerful and the DC has been adjusted to keep the game in balance.

Mirror Image Monsters.

Armed with each player's character statistics the DM can select or even create (DM's Guide Pages: 273-282) monsters that the players encounter that are mirror images of the players in their ability statistics, damage statistics and even certain class features such as being able to take a second action each turn.

The reason for a DM to create a mirror image monster is that the problem player has specifically chosen traits in a way to defeat, over power creatures or break game features.

When a player is confronted with a creature that has all the same abilities it now forces that player to actually PLAY the way the game was intended to be played.

That is to say, in a fair way where the fun is in the challenge of game play (Which they have specifically designed their character or play in a way to defeat).

If a DM has no desire to create a mirror image monster from scratch then select a monster with similar statistics in ability. Arm the monster with a weapon, spell or ability that is similar to the player(s) creating the trouble.

Keep in mind that the idea is not to go directly after one person or attack just one person with the mirror image monster. Play the monster as you would normally in normal game play with the exception that you are using the problem player(s) tactics against them.

To make mirror image monster work there are two things the DM will need to do. One: Have a character statistic sheet. Two: Pay attention to how the character(s) play.

How to DM quirks.

The DM has several ways of implementing and playing quirks. Best times to implement quirks are through gate/dimension/portal travel, unknown or strong drinks or portions and the always popular cursed item.

Depending on DM style several options for playing the quirks exist. The first option is the roll option. This is the DM being nice and fair. The DM allows the character a chance (Albeit a small one) to roll a D20 against an ability score or DC that the DM has come up with.

The other option is the no roll option. As the name implies the player gets no roll to save themselves from the quirk effects and has no choice in the matter but to have the quirk.

Some DM's may wish to force disadvantage (Or rolling two D20's and taking the lowest score of the two) when the quirk manifests.

If a player is especially powerful (Ultrahigh modifier etc...) then in certain situations the DM may force double disadvantage on the player. That is the player rolls 3D20 and takes the lowest result.

Example: A player eats an herb that has a mind altering affect or something of the like that causes the DM to inform the player that they have to make all rolls with disadvantage for the next few rounds. The players looks at the DM, smiles and then eats more of the herb on purpose. The DM now has a double disadvantage situation.

Do the character(s) teleport behind the monster to gain advantage? Then the monster will teleport behind the player(s) during it's turn to gain advantage.

Do the character(s) use every single attack action, bonus action and action surge they can to defeat the monster(s) on the first turn of play? Then the mirror image monster does the same.

Keep in mind this is not done to kill the character but to handicap the character by bringing their Hit Points down to a level that makes them get real about game play. Once the problem player is "made real" then the DM is free to continue crafting and narrating the story content of the adventure.

Quirks:

These are solid and game tested quirks. The DM is encouraged to create there own quirks. The quirks can be assigned by the DM as needed to problem players or the DM can roll a D20 and pick from list below. The DM can also roll a D20 (Acting like it matters) and then pick the quirk that will be a problem for the problem player to deal with.

1) Dyslexia – 1D4 rounds unable to read spell scrolls and /or spell books correctly. Spells backfire or fail.

2) Anxiety attack – seized with fear. Unable to make action on first turn.

3) Sudden Cowardice – runs away provoking attacks of opportunity from other creatures/beings engaged in combat with.

4) Loose Voice – unable to pronounce spells properly or sing properly. Disadvantage on all rolls involving voice (Persuasion etc…)

5) Sudden Shyness – disadvantage on charisma based saving rolls. Unable to intimidate or coerce anyone.

6) Fear of small animals – causes sudden cowardice or anxiety attack quirk.

7) Fear of large animals – causes sudden cowardice or anxiety attack quirk.

8) Total honesty – momentary lapse of time (1D6 Rounds) character speaks absolute and brutal truth, incapable of lying or any type of deception "in game".

9) Sneezing fits – 1D4 rounds character continuously sneezes making stealth impossible.

10) Momentary attention deficit – 1D4 rounds character is unable to concentrate on task at hand making spell casting impossible and forcing disadvantage rolls on basic functions.

11) Loud flatulence – gives away location making stealth impossible (Especially to creatures with good smelling abilities) and forces disadvantage on public speaking/charisma based situations.

12) Hiccup attack – makes concentration tasks impossible, gives away location, forces disadvantage on dexterity based situations (Aiming, picking locks etc…).

13) Addiction – addiction to a a drink, food or other substance that character has no control over. Often ends in a fight or the player ending up in the stockade. Player makes enemies and quickly accumulates debt.

14) Chaos – 1D4 rounds player is assaulted with anarchist thoughts, feeling and behaviors. Player is contrary to everything and everyone. Often creates arguments and fights for no reason. Disadvantage on **all** ability rolls.

15) Fear of liquids – 1D4 rounds player has fear of any kind of liquid including blood. Causes anxiety attack or sudden cowardice.

16) Fear of public places – 1D4 rounds player has fear of public places. Causes anxiety attack or sudden cowardice.

17) Uncontrollable laughter – 1D4 turns player has uncontrollable laughter. Laughs at everything including monsters and even death!

18) Sudden offensive body odor – player suddenly stinks giving away location and failing charisma rolls.

19) Delusion of Grandeur – 1D4 Rounds character has delusions of grandeur causing disadvantage to all rolls as character is living in fantasy world in head. Additionally character does not correctly perceive or understand other players words or intentions and acts in a way that causes trouble for the whole party as well as themselves.

20) Heals that harm – 1D4 rounds player attempts to heal with a spell the amount of healing is applied directly as damage to target of healing.

The Takeaway

In the world of Sales there a concept called the "Takeaway". The takeaway is a concept of literally taking away all the objections that a prospective customer would have. When done correctly this leaves the customer with no reason and nothing standing in the way of them making a purchase.

In the same way a DM can do the same thing in at a game table with players. The first part of the takeaway is identifying what needs to be taken away.

For instance let's use a player that has accumulated a lot of wealth. They then use the wealth in the game in a game breaking way. Whether it is bribing NPC's or purchasing hard to find and overpowered magical items it matters not.

This player is using wealth to disrupt the game mechanics. The takeaway? Place the player in situations where wealth has no power. Much like a wealthy man dying of thirst in the desert, gold means nothing and water suddenly means everything.

While there a many examples that could be brought up that would fill many pages the simple and most effective way to utilize the takeaway is to identify all the things that need to be taken away from troublesome players and then transporting them to a new world setting where things don't work the same way.

In a world where a resource such as aiding another person is the currency other mediums of currency such as gold are rendered meaningless. In a world where the physics are different physical strength is the only effective means of doing anything and magic is rendered useless. This can work in reverse as well.

If the players entered the new world via an extra dimensional portal, portal or teleportation device perhaps they picked up a quirk of some kind entering the world setting, reality or parallel universe.

Of course the DM is free to create their own world. The Dungeon Master's Guide entire first chapter (Pages 9-68) is about this subject. While a created world takes time to create it is well worth it for keeping troublesome players in check.

Limit Multi-classing.

The DM should always do a "Session Zero". A Session Zero is a session where the DM sits down with the players (Usually at the very beginning of a new campaign) and establishes the rules.

During the Session Zero the DM should establish with the players that no more than two classes will be allowed for multi-classing.

This is one area that creators of the current edition rules left a highly and far to often exploited feature that creates over powered character in as little as 5 levels of experience.

The game developers should really reconsider putting a limit on the multi-class feature.

MULTI-CLASS=MULTIPLE QUIRKS!

Limit Magic Items.

The magic items that a player can actively use in an adventure should be limited to no more than three. The player can own as many magic items as they wish. But what the player takes with them on an adventure to actively use should be no more than three of ANY kind of magic item.

Don't forget to count armor and/or shields as separate magic items. A player with magic armor, a magic weapon and a magic ring would count as three items.

This topic should also be brought up by the DM during session zero and be agreed up on by all players before an adventure begins.

Downtime as a control mechanism.

Downtime is the time between actual game sessions a player can use to apply towards creating something useful for their character. Learning a new skill, increasing abilities, extending proficiencies or creating new weapons or spells are all activities the player can engage in.

The DM can use downtime as a control mechanism by letting players know that they are able to do or make something but that it will happen several sessions from the current session before going into effect.

This allows the DM time to make the proper game adjustments, allows the player to have what they want and accomplishes these things without ruining the current game adventure or balance.

Party composition.

An adventure party should have at least four players with each player playing a character class that keeps the party balanced. A good balance is a fighter, a magic user, a healer and a secondary fighter such as a Rogue or Ranger.

If the party is not properly balanced the DM can use this to their advantage to keep troublesome players in check.

Make sure to double check the composition of the adventure party at your table. If the party is missing a healer then exploit their lack of healing ability. If the party is missing a fighter exploit their timidness to go straight into battle. If the party is missing magic users then exploit their inability to check for cursed items or detect explosive runes or glyphs.

Explain that to me?

A tactful DM should always be open to whatever ideas their players come up with. Always lend an open ear to what they want to do or intend to do in an adventure

If a player has come up with something that is ridiculous make sure to always hear the player out and remain open (Appear considerate). Ask the player how they came up with what they came up with. Ask the player to show you the rules in the books that they are using (Or twisting) to come up with their creation. Don't ever be afraid to ask "Explain that to me?".

How did that roll treat you?

At session zero establish a new critical fail roll threshold. Instead of the number one increase it from numbers one through five.

Any player who rolls a five or less critically fails. At a table with troublesome players don't be afraid as DM to reward there critical failure with some kind of damage to themselves. Shooting their own foot and thus causing disadvantage on movement etc... is valid and called for!

Thankful for....

I am very thankful for 5th Edition. Having got my start back with the Red Box Basic Set back in 1984 I have played every edition of D&D to some extent or another. Personally the way the rules were constructed and how much they interfered with game play was always discouraging in the earlier editions.

It was the "5th" that got me back into the magical world of gaming. Finding that magic again is worth more than any pot of gold at a rainbow's end.

Additionally I am thankful for the game shop that hosts me as a weekly DM. Most importantly: I am thankful for the very intelligent, difficult, creative and evil geniuses that are the players making up my adventure campaigns and world settings. Without them I would not be. They press me and challenge me to be better in way, shape and form.

Each of the players, in their own way, are experts at something in the game. As they creatively apply or deviously work loop holes, they do it like professionals with a bit of panache to match. Sometimes it is fun...other times not so much.

It is through all the years of crazy adventures with even crazier players that all of this information you are reading has come to be.

I hope that you have found it useful, thought provoking and entertaining! Almost all of the material I put out at the DM's Guild is "pay what you want".

I have gone through some tough times and wished I could still have access to things even though I didn't have money for it. So if your hurting - don't sweat it. If your doing well and can spare a dollar for my efforts it would be greatly appreciated.

       ---Jason.

Player Statistic Sheet

Character name: **Player name:**

Class(es)

Level(s)

Armor Class   **armor/shield/magic/item**

Hit Points

Proficiency bonus   **proficient in:**

Highest ability Score   **lowest ability score**

Most used weapon

Modifier

Weapon Damage Dice

Weapon Max Damage   **Extra Attack ability/Surge ability**

Most used Magic items

1:

Damage/effects:

2:

Damage/effects:

3:

Damage/effects:

Magic Users- Most used spells

1:

Damage/effects:

2:

Damage/effects:

3:

Damage/effects:

Player strategies/tactics: