

DM YOURSELF



TOM SCUTT

DM Yourself



This book is not authorized by or affiliated with Wizards of the Coast LLC

Cover illustration by Gary Noble (after David A. Trampier's classic AD&D PHB frontispiece)

Interior illustrations by Gary Noble & Tom Scutt

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this document or portions thereof in any form whatsoever

Copyright © 2020 by Tom Scutt

Kickstarter edition August 2020

Contents

Introduction	3
Why play Solo?.....	3
Why DM Yourself?	3
Why use D&D 5e?	4
Why only one player character?.....	4
Which Adventures does this work with?	4
Character Creation (or, <i>How to Prepare for the Adventure</i>).....	5
Increasing the PC's Power.....	5
Safeguards and Rebalancing the Action Economy	5
Lowering the Adventure Difficulty.....	8
Default Behaviours	9
Roleplaying Tips for Character Creation	11
Navigating the Scenario Document (or, <i>How to Read the Adventure</i>)	13
Skim reading vs. deep reading	13
Where to start and what to skip (and when to come back to it)	15
Avoiding spoilers (but not getting hung up about them)	17
Using flashbacks.....	17
Playing Solo (or, <i>How to Play the Adventure</i>)	19
The Immersion Table	19
Exploration, dungeon maps and simulating fog-of-war	24
How to <i>DM Yourself</i>	26
Minis vs. Theatre of the Mind.....	28
Making Binding Decisions	30
Using Hindsight	32
Logging time and resting	33
Secrets, traps and puzzles.....	34
Scaling enemies	36
Starting the Encounter.....	37
Combat and enemy behaviour	38
Ending the Encounter	40
Towns and NPCs.....	41
Treasure and Rewards	43
Experience and Levelling-Up.....	44
End of the Adventure	44
Appendices.....	45
A Minimal DC Oracle (for situations not covered in the adventure).....	45
References and Further Reading	46
The Extended Immersion Table	46
AI Combat Tactics Tables	50
A Guide to DMing Yourself through Well-Known Adventures	55
Acknowledgements	59
<i>DM Yourself</i> Solo Character Sheet Add-On	60

Introduction

Welcome to *DM Yourself* – a guide for how to play existing Dungeons & Dragons Fifth Edition (D&D 5e) adventures/campaigns (such as *The Lost Mines of Phandelver* or *The Dragon of Icespire Peak*) solo with a single character, as close to the way they are written as possible. The aim is to allow players to enjoy these adventures solo with the minimum of preparation, work or additional rules, and maximum immersion. It's going to be an exciting journey, so let's get started...

Why play Solo?

My family and I love playing D&D, but over the past couple of years, for one reason or another we have been lucky to manage a session together every couple of months. Also, I am usually the DM and I miss the experience of actually playing – so out of frustration (and a desire to make some progress on the big pile of D&D adventures I own) I started to explore options for playing solo.

Why DM Yourself?

Currently there are two main ways of playing D&D 5e solo:

- 1) Choose-your-own-adventure style modules, written specifically for the solo 5e player. The best of these are Paul Bimler's *5e Solo Gamebooks* series. This style of solo play is really enjoyable and I recommend giving it a try, but it tends to suffer from three drawbacks: it is in the nature of CYoA books that they are quite short (writing branching narrative is intensive work), they tend to be quite deadly and unforgiving, and as a player you are limited to the choices offered to you by the author.
- 2) Using DM emulators such as Mythic and Dungeon/Encounter/Quest generators, as in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* or *The Solo Adventurer's Toolbox*. Again, such soloing can be very enjoyable, but again there are drawbacks. These adventures can feel more like creative writing exercises than playing, and there is a lot of rolling and looking up on tables to generate every room and encounter. This can leave the actual play feeling disjointed and non-immersive, and the stories produced often feel rather random rather than being coherent narratives with an overarching story arc.

I realised that what I was after was a third way, with which I could play all the adventures I have that are currently lying around gathering dust. This way would lie somewhere in between the somewhat restrictive, on-rails nature of the gamebook and the free-form, sandbox approach of the DM emulators – and unlike these approaches, very little has been written about this third way. My goals were:

- To be able to play adventures as close to the way they were written as possible, with minimum rule changes, preparation or bookkeeping.
- To be able to play with a single player character, but without that character needing to be an invincible superhero.
- To achieve maximum immersion, so that the experience recreated some of the feel of playing a roleplaying game (rather than just reading-with-dicerolls).
- To find a way to deal with the inevitable spoilers and hidden information, so that the player could still experience the story.
- To provide a small set of unobtrusive rules to stop the player from cheating or bending the rules (DMing yourself is hard!).

Over a period of months I developed a system that I think accomplishes most of these goals. Of course, it is not as good as playing with a group of friends, but it does provide a way to experience all those amazing existing D&D 5e adventures on your own.

Why use D&D 5e?

The short, flippant answer is because it is the world's greatest roleplaying game.

The longer answer is that D&D 5e has a number of features that make it perfect for solo roleplaying. In 5e there is an ability check for just about everything. This makes it easy to remove subjective DM decisions and judgements from the equation when playing solo. This is not to say that *DM Yourself* is just dice rolling – there is much more to it than that – but the basic 5e rules do make solo play much easier than it would be in Old School Revival (OSR) systems, where the DM has to do more of the heavy lifting. Additionally, 5e is much less dependent on miniatures and exact combat map movement than (recent) previous editions, and much more amenable to 'theatre of the mind'. Again, this means it is easier to automate enemy behaviour during combat than it would be in a system that demanded exact grid movement and positioning.

Having said that, much of the material in *DM Yourself* could be used to solo other roleplaying systems if the adventures are structured in a similar way to 5e adventures (e.g. boxed location text, numbered location maps) and they use similar mechanisms (e.g. hit points, skill tests/ability checks). Most of the rest could be relatively easily adapted.

Why only one player character?

I experimented a couple of times with trying to run a normal party of four PCs through an adventure playing solo, but I found it was really unsatisfactory. You already have to split yourself between the roles of DM and player, and trying to divide your player role into four player characters ends up with you not really being invested in *any* of them. It's hard to stay immersed in the scene, and difficult to keep track of things when you're constantly switching back and forth between characters – and as those characters level up the sheer number of decisions and permutations of possible actions can slow the game to a crawl.

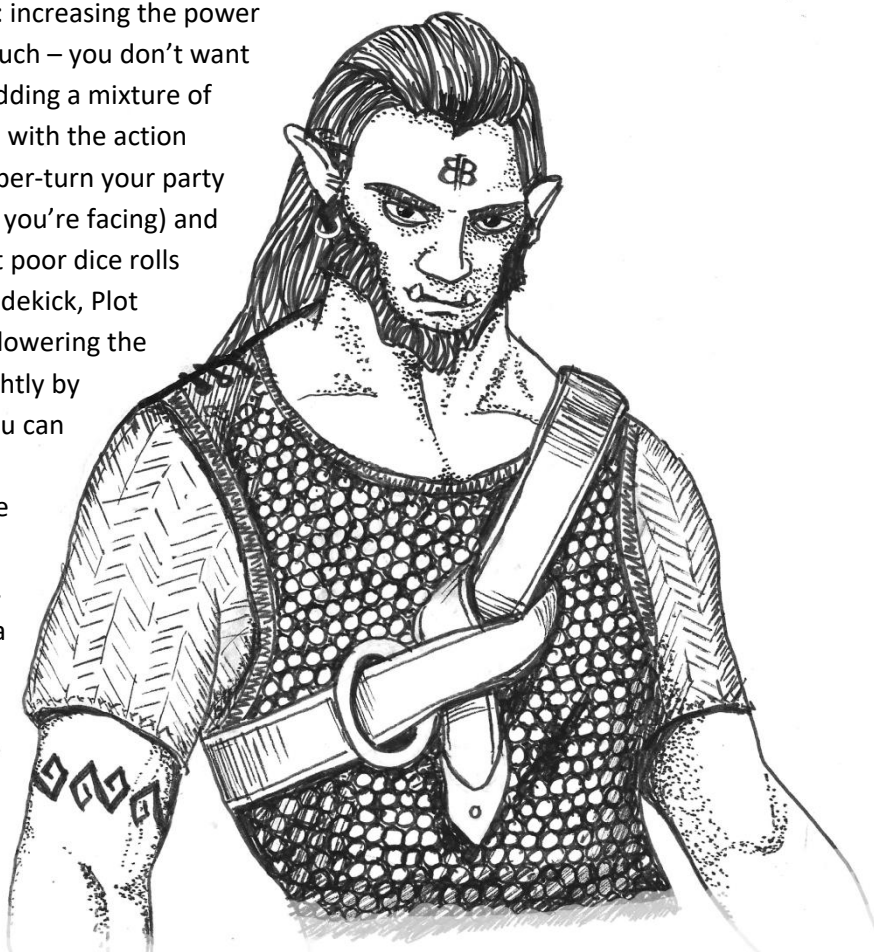
A single player character on their own can be problematic too, but most of those problems can be solved by using a Sidekick (as described in the section on Character Creation). This is the sweet-spot for solo play. You have one main character to focus on and get invested in – you're playing a single character just like in a regular game of D&D – but they have help when they need it.

Which Adventures does this work with?

The system works best (or, rather, works easiest) with linear and/or quest based adventures like *The Lost Mines of Phandelver* or *Dragon of Icespire Peak*. Big, open, sandbox campaigns like *Curse of Strahd* or *Storm King's Thunder* are more of a challenge. This is not to say they don't work at all – I can guarantee you'll have more fun playing the campaign than just reading it – but you will have to learn to live with accepting some spoilers, and the creative use of flashbacks and plot armour for if (let's face it, when) things go wrong...

Character Creation (or, How to Prepare for the Adventure)

This section mainly deals with how to create a PC in the best way to allow you to re-balance adventures (which are almost always written for a party of four or five adventurers) to a single PC. This is achieved in three ways: increasing the power of the PC (although not too much – you don't want them to feel overpowered); adding a mixture of safeguards and checks to help with the action economy (how many actions-per-turn your party has compared to the enemies you're facing) and to provide a safety net against poor dice rolls etc. (giving your character a Sidekick, Plot Armor, and Hero's Luck), and lowering the difficulty of the adventure slightly by reducing the monsters' hp. You can adjust the difficulty to your preference by the mix of these systems you choose to adopt (see *Difficulty Levels* on pg. 9). Finally you will need to write a set of Default Behaviours for your character. There are also a number of general character creation tips to improve your roleplaying experience, listed at the end of this section.



Increasing the PC's Power

The first thing to do is raise the character's level in order to make up for the fact that there is only one PC in the party. However, I find it deeply unsatisfying playing a character that is several levels above the adventure, so we're going to raise the character by just a single level. For example, if the adventure was designed for a party of four Level 1 characters, your character will start at Level 2.

Next we're going to maximise the hp for that character – so if your character normally gets d8 plus their Constitution bonus each time they gain a level, instead they get 8 plus their Constitution bonus.

Safeguards and Rebalancing the Action Economy

The three biggest problems of playing with a single character are that a simple run of bad luck can easily lead to you getting killed, there's no-one to get you back on your feet if things do go wrong, and you can easily be overwhelmed by lots of even low-challenge enemies because they can take so many actions each turn compared to you. There are several safeguards in *DM Yourself* to deal with these issues.

The first safeguard is absolutely essential: the *Sidekick*. Sidekicks are the perfect addition for solo play. They help to address all three of the problems above, *and* they are ideal for introducing more

actual roleplaying into your solo adventures. Although the true solo hero – a single character on their own against the world – may seem like the perfect archetype, ideally you want some lesser mortal to witness and be amazed by your heroism, to provide the perfect set-up lines for your devastating wit, and to have your back *just in case* something should go wrong.

The Sidekick rules are in the D&D Essentials Kit box. I can't reproduce them here for obvious copyright reasons, but those lovely people at *Wizards of the Coast* have made them available, for free, in a downloadable pdf (link in the References section).

The Sidekick rules given in the Essentials rulebook only cover Levels 1 to 6. However, if you buy the D&D Essentials Kit, you get a code for D&D Beyond which gives you the Sidekick rules up to Level 12. If you want more or higher-level Sidekicks, there are some documents listed in the References section. You'll find a non-standard Sidekick and a framework for creating your own at RPGBOT's *Practical Guide to Sidekicks* (link in the References).

The published Sidekick traits omit racial traits of any kind, so there is no difference between two sidekicks of the same type even if they are of different races. You can customise your Sidekick by applying racial traits from the table on page 282 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (DMG). These are simplified when compared to the racial traits from the *Player's Handbook* (PHB), but this makes them more suitable for the streamlined rules and abilities you want for a Sidekick.

A couple of things to remember about your Sidekick: they will always be the same level as you, and they also have maxed out hitpoints.

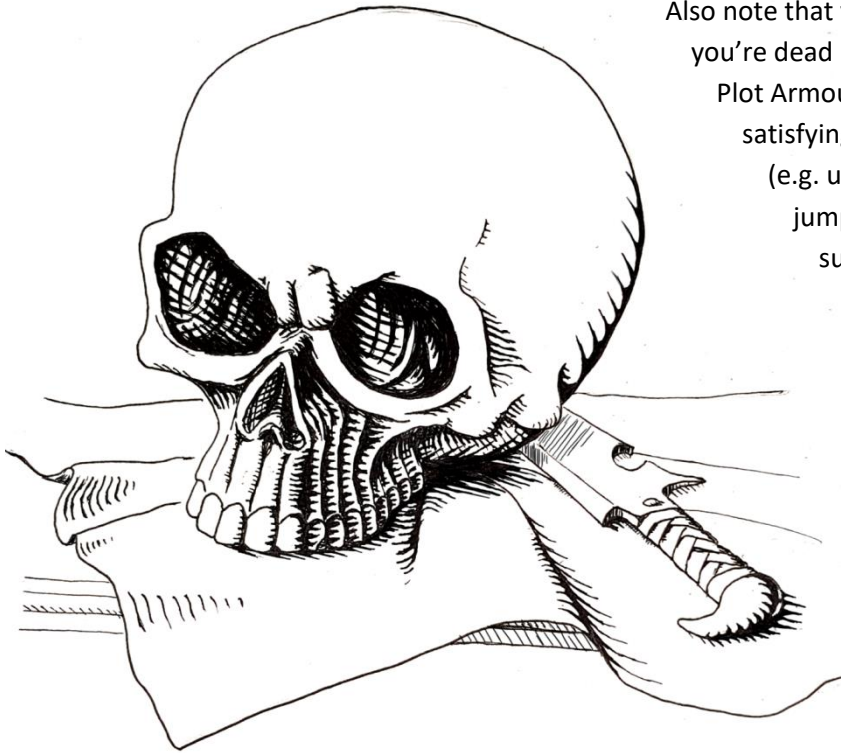
If, through carelessness or misfortune, your Sidekick should die, you can recruit a new one the next time you're in a settlement. Promises of splitting future loot may not be enough, so you'll need to spend your level x 10gp up-front in order for them to join you. Ideally, you should roleplay the encounter – hopefully you're going to be spending a long time together, so it would be good to have a memorable first meeting.

The next safeguard is *Hero's Luck*. This is basically the same as the Lucky feat, but it comes for free, and you share the 3 luck points with your Sidekick. (Note, however, that the PC is not allowed to take the normal Lucky feat.) So, 3 times a day you can roll an additional d20 on an attack roll, saving roll, ability check, or death saving throw made by you or your Sidekick (or an attack roll made against one of you), *after* the roll but *before* the outcome is determined. You can then decide which d20 to use for the result. This is a great way of avoiding a killer blow, or making sure that one of your own attacks hits! The fact that the luck points are shared makes for some interesting dilemmas: do you save your Sidekick from a terrible fate and risk not having a luck point left to save yourself later?

The final safeguard is a simple mechanic I've called *Plot Armour*. This is the failsafe, the nuclear-option, the get-out-of-jail-free card. The simplest statement of Plot Armour is this: when you are about to die, you don't. However, it's not that easy – there must always be a *story* to explain how you survived, and there must always be (usually dire) *consequences*.

Plot Armour is like a scene fading to black and going to a commercial break. Take the time to think through an interesting and imaginative reason for why and how your character has survived. You can never have more than 1 Plot Armour point; you start the game with one, and if you spend it you get it back the next time you level up.

Plot Armour is incredibly powerful, but there is a limit to the total number of times your character can use it over their entire lifetime - once they've used it five times, that's it. If you feel like Plot Armour removes all jeopardy then you can choose not to use it at all, you can play on Hard difficulty where you can only ever use it once, or literally put a timer on it – if, after a minute, you haven't come up with a convincing escape, then it's Game Over.



Also note that you do not have to wait until you're dead (or at 0 hit points) to activate Plot Armour – it is often narratively more satisfying to do it a few beats earlier (e.g. using the last of your strength to jump from the cliff as the horde surrounds you).

Some example Plot Armour stories are listed below. I strongly recommend that you make up your own story to fit the situation, but if you run out of inspiration you can roll a d8 on this table, adapting details to fit your scenario and rerolling if the given story really doesn't fit.

D8 Story

- 1 The enemies leave you for dead – you wake up d4 hours later on 1 hp
- 2 When you go over the cliff, you miraculously fall into the river, or catch hold of a root
- 3 The enemies stop short of killing you, for reasons as yet unknown
- 4 You duck behind a rock at the exact moment the dragon breathes fire, and hide there
- 5 The floor/ground/bridge gives way beneath you, saving you from the killing blow and depositing you somewhere out of harm's way (for now!)
- 6 The enemy, in their cruelty, decide they would rather you live severely wounded than die quickly
- 7 Your Wild Magic/Patron/Deity/Angelic Guide intervenes, whether by accident or design
- 8 What would have been a fatal blow clips one of the other enemies instead, a mass brawl breaks out and you crawl away in the confusion

And here are some example *consequences* – as before, ideally you should make up your own, but if you are struggling, roll a d8 and adapt/reroll if necessary.

D8 Consequence

- 1 Your sidekick is dead. Maybe they stepped in front of you, or pushed you out of the way and took the fatal damage in your place, perhaps you'll never know...
- 2 When they leave you for dead, the enemies steal *all* your money
- 3 As above, but they steal d3 of your best magical items/weapons/armor (i.e. the ones you use most – decide ties by cost/rarity)
- 4 You are tied up in dungeon cell or at your attackers' camp. How do you escape?
- 5 You are *maimed*, and suffer disadvantage on all Constitution, Dexterity, and Strength ability checks and saving throws. This condition can only be healed by a *Greater Restoration*
The trauma of what happened stays with you. Roll a d6 – you gain a (1–3) Long-Term Madness or (4–6) Indefinite Madness (roll on the relevant table on DMG pg. 260, and read the Madness rules)
- 6 The Wild Magic/Patron/Deity/Angelic Guide that saved you also curses you (roll on the Minor Detrimental Properties table, DMG pg. 220; apply effects as if you were attuned to the artifact) or places you under a *Geas* (PHB, pg. 244) with no saving roll, in which case you as DM will need to make a judgement on what would be a suitable command
- 7 Your best magical item/weapon/armor took the brunt of what should have been the killing blow and was shattered. It cannot be mended
- 8

Lowering the Adventure Difficulty

I want to avoid changing the actual adventure itself in any substantive way. Instead, *DM Yourself* makes some very quick and easy changes to combat and monster stats that can help to rebalance the action economy and improve player survivability.

In general, if the adventure says something like “there are three times as many Orcs as there are characters”, or if the adventure adjusts the difficulty of encounters depending on the size of the party, treat the number of player characters as three.

When you're attacking, you get to use a slightly modified version of the *Cleave* rules (DMG, pg. 272). If a melee attack reduces an enemy to 0 hp, any excess damage from that attack can carry over to another enemy within melee range (if the original attack roll would have hit it). If that enemy is also reduced to 0 hp, repeat the process. This can also apply to ranged attacks if there is another enemy standing directly behind the original target.

When you're being attacked, instead of *rolling* for damage you take from successful attacks against you, you just take the average damage shown in the monster stat block.

Enemies *do not* do double damage on a critical hit.

Enemies have $\frac{3}{4}$ of their normal (stat block) hit points, and most enemies will attempt to flee from combat if they are reduced to a third of the hit points they started the fight with (i.e. $\frac{1}{3}$ of their stat block hit points). This is covered in more detail in the section dealing with Combat and Enemy Behaviour.

Using a potion only takes a bonus action rather than a full action (administering a potion still takes a full action).

There is also an optional rule called Hindsight – this is dealt with in the section on Playing Solo.

Difficulty Levels

The Character Creation, Gameplay and Adventure Difficulty changes outlined above constitute what could be called *DM Yourself's* **Normal** difficulty. Of course, you are very welcome to mix and match the adjustments suggested above as you see fit, but if you find playing with the Normal set of rules either too challenging or not challenging enough, you could try these 'difficulty levels' instead:

- **Easy:** In addition to all the Normal changes you get the following:
 - *Improved Initiative* (your PC and Sidekick gain advantage on Initiative rolls)
 - *Improved Resistance* (if your PC fails a saving throw, they can choose to automatically succeed instead. They can do this a number of times per day equal to their half their proficiency bonus rounded down)
 - *Improved Healing* (maximise hit points recovered by PC and Sidekick from Short Rests, Potions and Healing spells and effects)
 - *Improved Plot Armour* (you can still only use Plot Armour once per level, but there is no other limit to the total number of times you can use it)
 - *Improved Quaffing* (Administering a potion only takes a bonus action)
- **Hard:** Play with the Normal changes with the following exceptions:
 - *One-Use Plot Armour* (your character gets to use Plot Armour once, ever)
 - *Like a Party of Four* (if an adventure scales encounters depending on the number of PCs, treat it as if you had a party of 4 PCs)
 - *Standard Enemy hitpoints* (enemies have their usual hitpoint values rather than $\frac{3}{4}$ of their normal stat block hitpoints)

Default Behaviours

Note: Credit for the idea of Default Behaviours for solo D&D should go to Ken Wai Lau, from his excellent website The Lone Crusader. Sadly, the website is no longer available, but there is a link to the Wayback Machine archive of the site in the references.

The *DM Yourself* Character Sheet in the Appendix has a list of Default Behaviours. These define what your character will do in any given situation (in the absence of any information to the contrary). This is important, because despite your best attempts to avoid spoilers you will sometimes read a room description with hidden information, and without your PC's Default Behaviours written down you will then have a dilemma about what they *would* have done if you hadn't known that information.

The golden rule is that it's too late to decide how you're going to approach a room once you've *started* reading the room description, and it's too late for your PC to search for traps, treasure or secret doors once you've read that the room contains such things.

For example, a location description tells you that one of the barrels in the storeroom is actually a mimic. It's now very difficult for your PC to act as if they didn't know that information. Will they search the room? Will they even bother entering the room, if it just looks from the doorway like a regular storeroom? It is also possible to handle this by making a Binding Decision (explained later) before you read the room description, but it's always better to have your PC's Default Behaviours defined as a backup in case you don't do that (*and* as a way of helping to define your character).

The behaviours listed in the checkbox list below are general, time-based behaviours. Because all of these activities increase your PC's survivability and/or wealth, it would be tempting to tick all of them, but that would be unrealistic – you cannot be focused on all things at all times – and it would also mean that your progress through a dungeon would slow to a crawl. So, you are limited to choosing only three of them (with the caveat that if you are using the time-logging rules described later, you can tick as many as you want, but each tick will add extra hazard). You should tick things that match your PC's character class and personality rather than just choosing the 'best' options.

General, time-consuming behaviours

- I will always listen at closed doors
- I will always search a room for secret doors after it is cleared
- I will always search a room for treasure after it is cleared
- I will always loot the bodies of my enemies
- I will always re-search dead-ends for secret doors
- I will always search for traps before entering a room or corridor
- I will always use stealth when entering a room
- I will always take anything I can carry that looks like it might be valuable/magical
- I will always search chests for traps, and only open them once the trap (if any) is disabled
- I will always explore every corridor/room that I find

The behaviours in the next list do not have a simple yes/no checkbox. These behaviours specify what weapon (if any) your PC usually has in their hand while exploring, who goes where in the marching order (this can be very important when deciding who gets hit with a surprise attack or who falls into a pit-trap), who speaks on behalf of the party in social encounters and what their default approach is when trying to get their way (this may not always be your PC – they might be the strong silent type while the Sidekick is the one with all the charisma; think the Witcher and Dandelion), and what they usually use for lighting when it's dark (if you use anything at all).

Other (non-time-based) behaviours

- is the weapon I have equipped by default
- goes first in the marching order (in single file)
- goes on the right (when walking abreast)
- usually speaks for the party in social encounters
- is our default approach in social encounters
- is used for lighting when it's dark

Alignment- and personality-based behaviours

These can be so many and varied that it would take another book to list them all – so make your own up. Ideally, at least one should be based on the PC's alignment, one on their class, and the rest on their background and personality – these may be related to combat, exploration or social interaction. They are similar to personality traits, bonds, ideals and flaws, but are rather more specific in nature. Ideally you want at least five of these behaviours – and they should be a mix of positive and negative.

Some examples:

- I'll never loot enemies bodies unless I'm looking for something in particular
- I'll never torture an enemy
- Undead are an abomination – I will destroy them unless they are beyond my power
- I just hate Dwarves, and find it impossible to be civil to them
- If my enemy is humanoid, I'll knock them out rather than kill them
- For some reason people always hide stuff up chimneys – if I see one, I'll search it
- The first thing I do when I wake up is cast *Mage Armour*, and when it wears off I cast it again

These default behaviours are not permanent. As your character grows you might change their tactics, adjust their opinions or learn a new favourite spell. In general, though, you should only change your PC's default behaviours between adventures during downtime, unless something occurs during the adventure to shift their behaviour (e.g. they find a new magical weapon which becomes their go-to equipped item, or they discover a puzzle that requires them to find 5 Jade Skulls to place on an altar, so you temporarily tick "I will always search a room for treasure after it is cleared").

However, don't feel that this means you are completely bound to these behaviours while you are playing. You can override or supplement default behaviours by making a *binding decision* – a temporary behaviour that usually just lasts for one location or encounter. This is explained later in the section on *Playing Solo*.

Default behaviours should never feel constricting – they are not there to limit your character, but they do serve two useful functions:

- They are an in-character method of keeping yourself honest whenever you accidentally read information about the area you are exploring which your PC wouldn't know, and they help you avoid the temptation to alter your PC's behaviour to take the most favourable option in the light of that information.
- They help with roleplaying. Your character's Default Behaviours help to define them, and are an effectively method of keeping your actions in-character during gameplay (something that can be easy to lose sight of when you're DMing yourself).

Roleplaying Tips for Character Creation

When I first started playing D&D solo I would often roll up a character's stats and just leap straight into the game and skip the "Personality and Background" section entirely (other than to find out what skill proficiencies my background gave me). After all, there was no-one else in the party, no-one to check my character's consistency; I could choose to do whatever I wanted as the situation arose. However, I realised this was a mistake, and under the *DM Yourself* system it's vitally important that you determine and record your character's personality traits, bonds, ideals and flaws. There are three reasons for this:

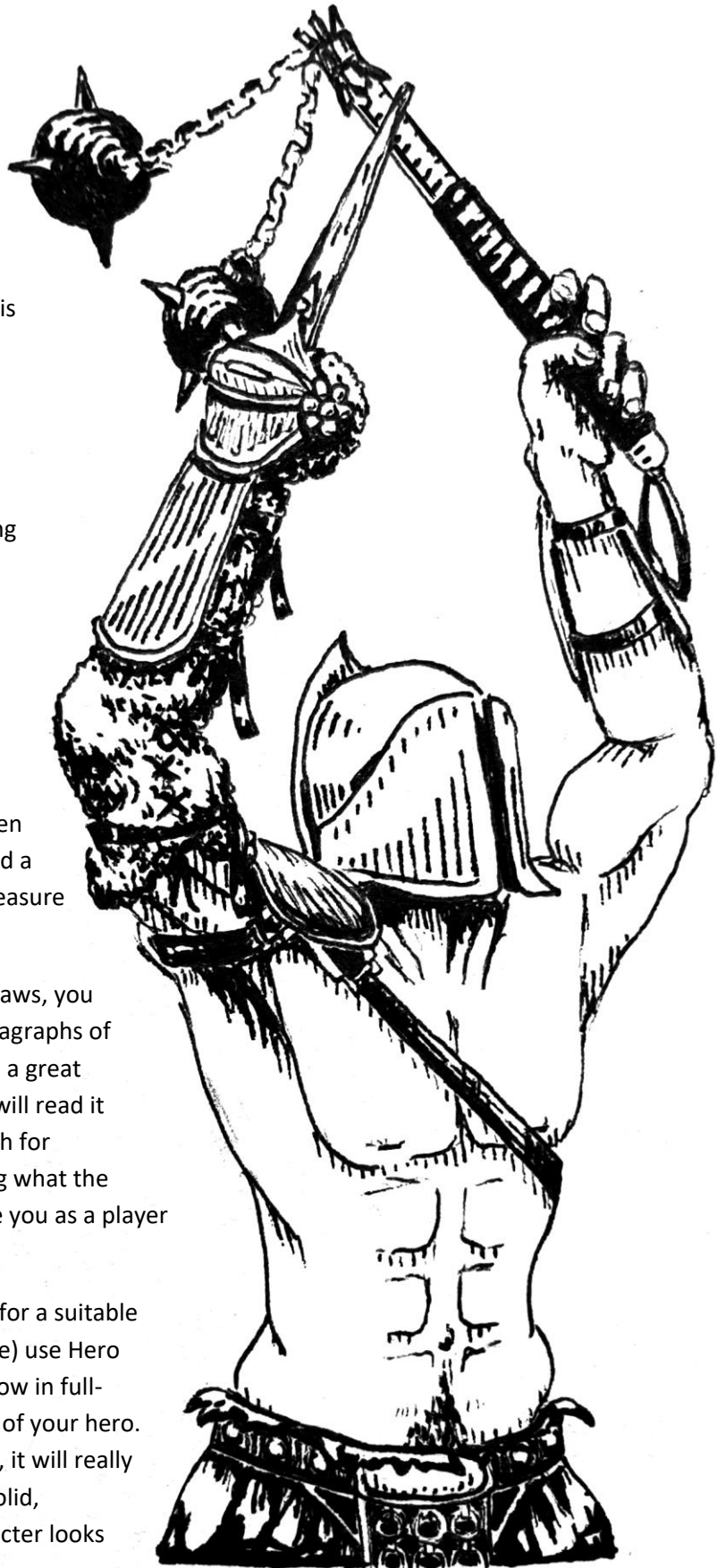
- Immersion is really important when playing solo. The more you know about your character, the better you can visualise them in the scene.
- Knowing your character's background and personality can help you give substance to their discussion with NPCs, as well as immersion to interaction with their Sidekick. It may also

have an effect on dice rolls: if one of your PC's flaws is that "I have a 'tell' that reveals when I'm lying", then you'll know to apply disadvantage on Deception checks.

- The most important reason is that it helps to guide your character's actions in situations where you're not sure what they would have done (i.e. not covered by default behaviours or binding decisions). For example, if a character has the flaw "I can't resist taking a risk if there's money involved", then you *know* that character is going to go and grab the suspiciously conspicuous pile of gold, even if you've accidentally spotted a spoiler revealing that the treasure is trapped.

As well as traits, bonds, ideals and flaws, you should write at least a couple of paragraphs of backstory – this does not have to be a great work of literature (after all, no one will read it except you), but it can be useful both for interesting dialogue and for deciding what the character will do in situations where you as a player knows things the character doesn't.

Finally, draw or do an image search for a suitable character portrait, or (my preference) use Hero Forge's amazing miniature editor (now in full-colour!) in order to create an image of your hero. As with background and personality, it will really help with immersion if you have a solid, consistent vision of what your character looks like.



Navigating the Scenario Document (or, How to Read the Adventure)

In this section we will look at various techniques to navigate the adventure document so as to minimise spoilers, what parts to skip and what to read, reading at different 'levels' for mechanisms, story and immersion, skim reading vs. deep reading, and how to use narrative techniques such as flashbacks to fix plot holes if you miss stuff.

Skim reading vs. deep reading

There are a few ways in which having a split personality might help with *DM Yourself*. Later, we'll discuss how you need to successfully adopt the roles of both DM and player, and how to keep those roles separate. For now, though, we're going to talk about how to read at two different levels, skim reading and deep reading, and how and when to switch between these levels.

Skim reading – this is how you'll start reading the module, and it is the default mode. Think of skim reading as being on watch: you'll read fast and light, make the best use of your peripheral vision and not get too focussed on particulars. Start reading the first paragraph of the section/block of text to get a sense of what it contains, and then let your eyes quickly scan down the text. There are two main things you're on alert for here: spoilers (i.e. information which your player shouldn't know about yet) and DC checks (this is usually information your player *might* be allowed to know if they successfully make the required ability check).

DC checks can act as markers in a block of text; they are easy to spot (your eye quickly gets trained to spot '**DC**' in a block of text) and easy to handle. Look to see if the player has to be doing something particular in order to even get a chance at rolling (e.g. "a character who searches the fireplace and makes a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check..."). In this situation, whether or not you get to make the check depends on your default behaviours and/or binding decisions. Often, however, the text will say something like "if the character succeeds on a DC 10 Intelligence (Religion) check, they recognize the symbol...". In that case you can simply make the roll. If you succeed, read on. If you fail, try to skip the rest of the sentence that explains what you would know or find if you had succeeded. This is something you get better at with practice, but if you *do* accidentally see what you would have won, you just have to ignore the information.

Spoilers are more difficult to deal with. Try to skip forward a sentence or two; if things still look 'spoiler-y' then you may have to skip forward a paragraph or two, or abandon the whole section/text block. With practice you can learn to skim read *really* lightly, skipping forward through the text, almost using peripheral vision and moving on at the first sign of something you shouldn't know as a player character. It's inevitable that you *will* see such things from time to time, but this usually isn't that much of a big deal – the very first line of *Dragon of Icespire Peak* mentions that the main antagonist is a dragon, but you'll probably have guessed that much from the title and the big picture of a dragon on the cover.

We'll discuss later how to deal with spoilers more systematically, but for now, if you come across one you should try to put it into one of three categories:

- A small piece of information that you can safely skip
- A larger piece of information (maybe a whole section of the adventure – anywhere from a paragraph to a page or two) that you might need to return to at some point. In this case you

need to make a note (ideally, bookmark it) of exactly where the information is that you're skipping, and the circumstances under which you can come back to it. Often this is made clear by the first line of the text. As soon as you've met the condition, go back and read the text.

- A key piece of information that is required to make the adventure work. This is the hardest sort of spoiler to deal with. Thankfully they don't occur too often, but when they do you have to just bite the bullet and read them. Again, the later section on spoilers talks about the best way to manage this, while the section on flashbacks discusses how to handle things if you miss a key piece of information.

Be particularly careful of **Location Overview** and **Quest Goals** sections, because these almost always contain spoilers. It's best to skim these very carefully. If it becomes clear that the text is going to give away spoilers, stop reading, skip over that section and only return to it when you've met one of the following conditions:

- The section mentions a 'trigger' condition that you've now met (e.g. "If the players spend the night in the haunted grove...")
- The quest is not really making much sense and it's clear you've missed a key piece of setup information.
- You've finished the quest (in which case you can go back and read the overview, but not act upon any information it contains – e.g. if it says "there is a magic sword hidden in the well", it is now too late to retrieve it). Of course, it is acceptable to get specified quest rewards that are listed in the text as long as you have completed the quest.

Example: The adventure tells you that the Gnome Inventors "fill you in on what's been happening" – this is the perfect trigger to finally go back and read the Location Overview text that you skipped earlier because of spoilers. When you do go back and read it, though, you get part-way through and then have to stop again when you get to the line "No-one except the King knows..."

Later on you find the King and talk to him. On a successful Persuasion check, it feels like the time is right to go back and finish reading the Location Overview, as well as a previously-skipped section on the Mystery Monster (because the King tells you about it).

It's often the case that you will get to a point in a quest/adventure where you need to read some of the background in order to make proper sense of it. You can often manage without it at the start, but it can later become obvious that you need some missing information in order to progress and/or understand the story.

Deep reading – when playing solo, you never read the adventure as you would read a novel. Not only are you jumping from place to place, but the level at which you read also varies – either the light-touch searching or skim reading, or the slow, mindful, immersion of deep reading.

When you deep read you are effectively doing the creative work that your DM would do for you in a normal multiplayer D&D session, painting the word-picture that fully describes your location and brings it to life. Rather than just reading the words, you are consciously recreating the scene in your mind and placing yourself within it. It may help to close your eyes after you've read the passage to help you achieve this.

Deep reading is used most often when reading a boxed or italicised location description (in conjunction with the *Immersion Table*, described later). The adventure may tell you to cross a rope bridge next to a waterfall over a misty pool containing small islands full of tall colourful mushrooms. Those are the ‘facts’ – a brief sketch of a description – but the bridge seems like a particularly scenic point, and a good DM would fill in the details. Take a moment and imagine being there on the bridge: the surreal beauty, the swaying of the bridge beneath your feet, the sense of vertigo as you look down at the misty pool and mushrooms below you (what do they look like?), the feel of the cool mist from the waterfall on your face, the smell of damp loam and fungus...

However, deep reading is not limited to location descriptions. Anytime you’re reading something which places you ‘in the scene’ – whether you’re talking to an innkeeper or on your horse travelling through the mountains – place yourself there and fill in all the details to help make the world of the adventure real. It can help to close your eyes and actually visualise your hands in front of you, as if you’re playing a first-person video game.

Where to start and what to skip (and when to come back to it)

A well-written adventure contains all the information you need in order to play it. The problem is that the information it contains was written for the eyes of the Dungeon Master and not for the players – it’s all there, but it’s not in the order you need it as a player, and much of the information should remain hidden until you reach a certain point. All in all, it’s difficult for you to play on your own without spoiling surprises and removing much of the challenge.

In addition to the overall narrative, the adventure contains lots of hidden information: where the monsters, traps and treasure are; the solutions to puzzles; the reactions, strategies and stat-blocks of monsters and NPCs; and so on. When playing solo you want to keep this information hidden as much as possible, because revealing it spoils the story and removes much of the challenge from the game.

In general (although it really varies from adventure to adventure), the *Introduction* and *Adventure Background* are important to skim read to get a sense of the overall storyline and structure of the adventure, but they tend to be full of spoilers; you need to be very careful with your skim reading and be prepared to only read the first part and come back to them later. There is often also an overview of the starting area, rumours and quest hooks. These are usually relatively safe, although you should only read the rumours that you ‘earn’ through interaction with the locals. Finally you’ll get to the actual quest areas, which will typically have some sort of location overview at the beginning (these often have spoilers, but it is important to read of much of these as you can), a map with numbered rooms or locations that correspond to boxed/italicised location descriptions (which you deep read, but only when you enter that location on the map), followed by details of what is in each location. These descriptions will always contain spoilers, so you must have made a firm decision about what you’re going to do in the location before you read them.

It can be difficult to see how this all works talking about it in the abstract, so let’s look at how I might manage the beginning of *Dragon of Icespire Peak* as an example. I start by *skim reading* the ‘Adventure Background’ – already there’s a red flag because of the title, and sure enough it’s clear from the first sentence that there are major plot spoilers ahead, so I decide to skip it (and make a

note to come back here to fully read the section only if the story really isn't making any sense without it and/or once I've finished the adventure).

The next section, 'Welcome to Phandalin', looks safe, so I read that, and then I find some boxed text that the DM would read aloud to the players at the start of the adventure. Not only do I *deep read* that, I also make a roll on the Immersion Table (see pg. 19), close my eyes and place myself in the scene. I roll a 4, and imagine the feel of the parchment as I smooth out the notices on the jobs board. (Note that whenever you're certain that a block of text is free of spoilers, you can always go back and read it properly if you feel you haven't got the full meaning of it when skimming.)

Next is a section on 'Exploring Phandalin', and a map of the town. The opening line of this section makes it clear that the town is available for adventurers to explore (see pg. 41 for more details on how to handling exploring towns), so I decide to head to Stonehill Inn and talk to the landlord there (I read the section on the Inn, playing out the conversation with the innkeeper and making a d6 roll on the Phandalin Tales table, being careful to only read the rolled result). I then go to the Townmaster's Hall (making an Immersion roll, I end up with some dialogue between PC and Sidekick about looking for work), check the jobs board and move on to the section on 'Phandalin Quests', reading just the starting quest descriptions (because the follow-up quests are only posted after two of the starting quests are completed, there's no reason to read them now). Also on this page is some boxed DM/rules text on 'Adventure Locations and Encounters'. I start reading this because it clearly has some useful guidance, but then skip the bottom half when it starts to get spoilery.

Finally, it is clear (both from the Contents page and from just flicking through the adventure) that this is the final page of the adventure setup. It makes sense to read the rest of this page before moving on. The section on 'Levelling Up' is useful because it tells me the levelling milestones for this adventure (though I will need to remember to scale the rewards for Solo play, i.e. a mention of Level 3 in the levelling up rewards is equivalent to my Level 4). The



section entitled 'Where's the White Dragon' is more problematic. As mentioned previously, the dragon's existence is not really a spoiler, given that it's on the front cover and mentioned in the title. However, it's clear that I need to *skim read* this section and be prepared to move on if necessary.

It turns out it's a good job I did skim read it – I should be rolling for the dragon's location every time I leave or enter a location. However, I can leave the paragraphs on what actually occurs if I encounter the dragon until it happens. So, with that in mind, I choose a quest that looks interesting and set off for Umbrage Hill, checking its location on the Sword Coast map before turning to that part of the adventure. The game is afoot!

Some additional tips when reading the adventure:

- If there is no boxed text, then read the location twice – once for gameplay purposes, seeing what’s in the room etc., and a second time for immersion, imagining yourself in the environment (ideally, with the aid of a roll on the Immersion Table)
- Make sure you read location descriptions for the corridors as well – it’s easy to get distracted and skip these when you’re focussed on what room/location you’re heading to next, neglecting the fact that the corridor may not be empty!
- Use lots of bookmarks for quick and easy document navigation. If you’re using a physical copy of the adventure, use small, coloured, self-adhesive post-its, page markers or index tabs. If you’re using a PDF document, use a reader that allows you to add bookmarks (if your PDF reader doesn’t have this facility you can use the reader’s highlighter and/or sticky notes functions as the next best thing). Make sure you bookmark the places you will return to throughout the adventure, such as the region map and home village, your current location/quest, and story points to return to – and write on the bookmarks. For return story/plot points, make sure this label includes the “trigger” condition that will allow you to go back and read that section.

Avoiding spoilers (but not getting hung up about them)

Combining the advice on different levels of reading, where to start and what to skip will be your best insurance against spoilers, and all of these techniques improve with practice. However, it’s easy for your eyes to wander and notice other information on the same page, so here is another practical step you can take to help avoid spoilers: windowing your view on the document so as to narrow your focus on the location description.

If you are using a physical, printed copy of the document, you can use a large index card to cover the column below where you’re reading, moving the card down and revealing a few lines at a time as you read. If you really want you could use a second card to cover the other column, or even go so far as to cut a 3.5”x2” (9cmx5cm) window in a card or sheet of paper, but personally I find that’s more fiddly than it’s worth.

If you’re using a soft PDF copy of the adventure, resize the window and/or zoom in so you can only see one column-width of text and maybe a couple of paragraphs in height.

So the message here is try to avoid spoilers, but don’t get hung up about them. Some great novels (e.g. *Fight Club*, *The Secret History*) tell you how they’re going to end or whodunit right from the word go, but it’s *how* the reader gets there that’s important.

Using flashbacks

Sometimes things go wrong. You might turn to a quest description and it is immediately clear that there should have been some preparation previously. For example, in the Loggers’ Camp quest description in *Dragon of Icespire Peak* there is a section on preparations that the characters should have made in Phandalin before setting out (which a DM would have known about in advance, but obviously the solo player has no way of knowing). In this sort of situation it is fine to play the preparation scene as a “flashback”. This can be done for any situation where you have skipped part of the story through no fault of your own. It is your choice whether you play out the scene or just

consider it done. This technique is used widely in film, TV and books, but not so often in D&D (which is a shame, because in fact it can be great for dynamic story-telling).

Note that a full flashback is different from what we might call a 'quick rewind'. This is usually where we discover extra information shortly after an event has taken place, but we don't need to play out a whole scene in order to fix things. A few examples of this sort of thing:

- It turns out that one of the guards was carrying the key, but it wasn't made explicit which one. Let's roll to see if it was on one of the ones I've dispatched and looted already.
- Earlier in the quest the dragon swooped down and grabbed three of the wild boar in the forest. Now I find out that some of those boars are actually shapechangers (that I'm about to encounter). I roll to see if any of this was true of any of the ones that were taken.
- After a memorable fight, I find further down the location description that there's some kind of anti-magic aura in this room, and none of the spells my character cast should have worked. In cases like this don't rewind the combat – instead just go with it. Maybe the anti-magic aura is intermittent, or your deity silently intervened, or the aura was never actually there at all. When in doubt, think "what would I have done as a DM?" – if you'd forgotten about the aura you wouldn't make your players redo the fight, you'd just keep quiet about it!

Again, films, TV and novels make great use of non-linear time – flashbacks, flash-forwards, backstories, scenes that start *in media res* (e.g. *Pulp Fiction*, *Memento*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) – but role playing games tend to be very rigid in playing things out in linear fashion from beginning to end. This may be because of paradoxes – what if I die now, when I already know the scene in five years' time where I defeat the dragon? – but mainly it's just tradition and/or laziness. However, there *are* ways of handling non-linear narratives that we can learn from:

- In the RPG *Blades in the Dark*, players can pay a *stress cost* to experience a flashback during an operation, in order to perform an action in the past that prepares for their current situation – e.g. paying off the Captain of the Watch to cancel tonight's patrol. You roll dice in the flashback to see how things worked out, then jump back to the present and resolve the situation depending on how the flashback went.
- As a more extreme example, in Chris Ware's amazing graphic 'novel' *Building Stories* you get a large box with 14 printed works in it, each telling a part of the main protagonist's story. There is absolutely no indication of which is the 'correct' order to read them – you just have to dive in, choose a starting place at random, and piece things together. The resulting story is completely non-linear, but very satisfying nonetheless. It's more like the way we hear the life-stories of friends: piecemeal, out-of-order, and often we may learn about something in their earlier life that suddenly makes sense of other things that happened much later on.

This is not to say that your solo D&D experience won't be a traditional linear narrative most of the time – but if you *do* end up having to juggle things (because, for example, you've missed an important piece of information) and some scenes end up out of sequence, it's really nothing to worry about.

One thing worth remembering: if you're playing out a flashback from more than a few days ago, it's possible that you (and your Sidekick) were lower level. Don't get hung up on the details, but just make a best guess at what your abilities and stats were at the time of the flashback.

Playing Solo (or, How to Play the Adventure)

In this section we finally get round to how to actually *play* the adventure. We cover the ‘Three Pillars of Adventure’ – Exploration, Social Interaction and Combat. We discuss how to maximise immersion so you don't end up just *reading* the scenario and rolling dice, how to cover up maps and information to try to keep information secret for as long as possible, how to deal with secrets, treasure and traps, how to track time and resting, how to act as your own DM and mechanisms to stop yourself cheating, how to start (and end) encounters and handle enemy behaviour in combat, how to handle settlements and NPCs, and how to handle the rewards of adventure – treasure, magic items and XP.

The Immersion Table

We start this section with the *Immersion Table* – a simple yet powerful system that lies at the heart of *DM Yourself*, and allows you to turn a location description into a creative, immersive experience. I will explain how it works in a moment, but first, read this rather uninspiring room description.

Numerous sacks and barrels are piled up in the north end of this large cave. To the east the damp floor slopes toward a narrow, cobwebbed opening that descends into darkness. A larger opening leads south to a set of natural stone steps back down to the river. In the middle of the cavern, smoke curls from the coals of a large fire.

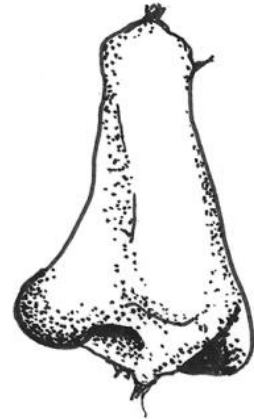
Boxed location text like this is ubiquitous in 5e adventures, but it's a real double-edged sword. On the one hand, for the DM who has a poor memory for the adventure or who hasn't put in the required prep time (or, in my case, usually both) it's an absolute godsend. On the other hand, it's far too easy just to read the text out loud and leave the location description at that, without adding any details to help your players picture the scene. As a solo player, the situation is even worse – you can read that description in a matter of seconds, just as you would when reading a novel, and have no sense of actually being there (and a few seconds later you'll have forgotten most of the details).

This is where the *Immersion Table* comes in. Every time you get to a boxed location text in the adventure, roll a d6 and look up the result on the table below. Then, either as you're reading or by closing your eyes for a few moments afterwards, imagine *one* aspect of the scene corresponding to the result you rolled. The whole process takes literally five seconds, but it forces you to focus, places you in the scene and is a really powerful technique for both immersion and improvisation – a sort of mindfulness technique for roleplaying. Try rolling a d6 now, and re-read the boxed text above taking the result into account.

d6	Result	Examples
1	Smell	Location (moss, decay, rust, damp, food, incense) or personal (blood, body odour)
2	Sound	Location (splashes, creaking, barking) or action (swords clashing, heavy breathing)
3	Sight	Distinctive or unusual visible feature of environment, NPC or enemy
4	Skin	Touching wood, stone, metal etc. Rain, sweat, blood on face, cobwebs in hair.
5	Social	Speech, facial expression, or emote from you, sidekick, NPC or enemy.
6	Sense	Sixth, temperature, atmosphere, memory, mood, emotion

1. **Smell** – the sense of smell is incredibly powerful in its ability to evoke a memory or create a sense of being present, but is underused in boxed location descriptions. An odour in a location may be pervasive and overpowering, or a momentary waft of something on the air.

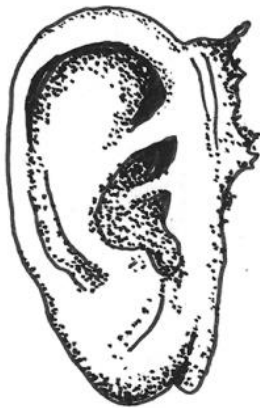
The smell might be all around you in the environment. In an outdoor location it could be the smell of pine needles, fungus or moss, flowers and blossom, ozone and salt on the beach, or petrichor (the name for that wonderful smell of the first rain on dry ground after a long period of warm weather). In an urban environment you might smell smoke, horse manure, stale beer, the mouth-watering smell of freshly made pies, or a heady mix of leather and acrid ammonia from a nearby tannery. Indoors or underground it might be beeswax polish, incense, old books, dust or straw bedding; damp stone, rust, decay, excrement, or sulphur.



Instead of the environment, the smell might come from someone or *something* in the room. You might talk to an NPC (or sidekick) and catch a strong whiff of damp cloth, pipe-smoke, halitosis, perfume, alcohol, unwashed hair or stale body odour. An enemy might bring a stench of brimstone, decaying flesh, grave-dust, musk or acid; their armour might carry the tang of leather or metal; combat might bring the iron-rich smell of fresh blood or (on a natural 1 on a save vs. Fear) fresh urine; or perhaps you catch your own scent of sweat.

Less often, this category also covers taste. Perhaps you get to taste one of those delicious pies, experience the crisp sweetness or sourness of fresh fruit, drink that bitter, hoppy ale or, in combat, suffer the alarming metallic taste of your own blood filling your mouth.

2. **Sound** – this is also underused in boxed location descriptions; often the DM or the players are left to fill in the gaps. As with smell, the sensory impact has a full spectrum – the sound may be deafening and overwhelming, or it may be a brief whisper on the edge of hearing that alerts you to a hidden danger.



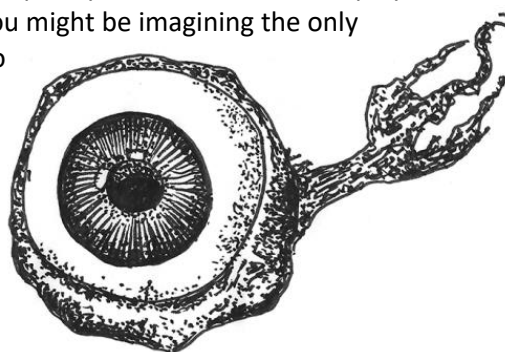
Outdoors, sounds may come from the weather – a booming crash of thunder or the haunting cry of the wind as it whips through a chill mountain pass – or from the location itself – the pleasant burble of a brook, the threatening roar of a river in torrent, the swoosh of a field of wheat in the breeze, the creaking of the branches of an ancient oak in a stronger wind. It could also come from animals and birds – foxes barking and wolves howling in the forest night, the crash of a startled deer in the undergrowth, a chorus of songbirds in a sunlit glade, the ominous clamour of a murder of crows, or the melancholy hoot of an owl in the darkness.

In the town, shop signs creak in the wind, and as the tavern door opens it releases a momentary burst of noise from within. The sounds of hammer on metal carry across the town square from the blacksmith's, and syncopate with the regular dull thud of a notice being nailed to a wooden board. Cries from the fishmonger and grocer compete with each other and with the laughter of small children as they run about the place, followed by the tired shouts of their mothers. As you pass closed doors, from within you hear coughs and groans (of pain or pleasure?), bitter arguments or muffled laughter.

In the dungeon there is the irregular drip of water from the ceiling, the scrape of a stone door against the floor, or the protesting squeal of a hinge that hasn't moved for decades. You might pick up the sound of nearby footsteps (maybe just an echo of your own), the faintly heard, distant patter of many small feet moving fast, or most disconcerting of all, distant laughter in a location you had thought abandoned for centuries.

An encounter with enemies in any location is almost always a cacophony: the sharp clash of sword on sword, the dull thud of hammer hitting shield. Each spell, often preceded by a prayer or an incantation, brings its own effects: the caustic fizz of acid splash, the electric snap of lightning bolt, the sonorous whoomph of the fireball. And then there are the sounds of the combatants themselves: breathing – rapid and panicky, bubbly and ragged, deep and measured – grunts of effort and cries of pain.

3. **Sight** – vision is our dominant, primary sense, and it comes as no surprise that the vast majority of boxed location descriptions are written purely in terms of what the players can see. So, unlike the previous two entries, where you might be imagining the only thing you can smell or hear, with sight we need to invent something *in addition* to what you already know you can see from the boxed description. This could be something obvious in the room, or it could be something you notice fleetingly from the corner of your eye, but either way it will be a distinctive or unusual visible feature of the environment, NPC or enemy.



So, what might you see that's not already in the boxed location description? Look up; if you're outside you'll see the sky. If it's a clear day it will be blue, but there are many different shades depending on the time of day and year. It might be sunrise or sunset, the sky might be tinted pink or orange, or it could have that amazing quality of light and shadow that comes during the 'golden hour' beloved of photographers and artists. There might be clouds – big and fluffy, scattered, grey and linear – or maybe it's overcast or foggy. In a forest, maybe the sky is obscured by the tree canopy – what does it look like? Green, glowing and luxuriant, or black and skeletal, silhouetted against the sky? In a town you would see the roofs and walls of nearby buildings – thatched, wooden shingles, clay or slate tiles, stone built or wooden, or maybe even wattle and daub. If you look down you'll see the road or path you stand on. Is it earthen and muddy, or paved? Is it damp or dry, bare or covered with grass, pine needles or bracken? Are there puddles, cart ruts, or wooden boards or stones in front of the entrances to buildings?

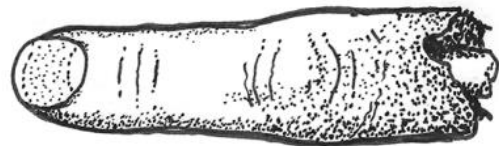
Inside a dungeon the ceilings of tunnels and chambers might be low or high (if you don't have dark vision you may not be able to see them at all). The floors and ceilings may be natural or dressed stone, smooth or uneven, damp or dry, and there might be stalagmites and stalactites.

In buildings or rooms, the floor might be earthen, wooden, stone-paved or tiled, or there might be rugs or carpets. Ceilings will probably be timbered, rarely painted or plastered. If you're in an attic you'll see rafters and probably thatch or timber. Think about why particular things have caught your eye. Is there a leaking roof in an otherwise up-market tavern, or a beautiful woven carpet in a hovel?

There might be something unusual about the lighting: an angled shaft of light cutting through the gloom, motes of dust dancing in the air; a glow from some unknown light-source casting long shadows that make strange, disconcerting shapes on the ground. Or you may discover something odd in the environment: a twisted tree-trunk that, from a certain angle, looks like a face; a brightly coloured piece of fabric in an otherwise monochrome room; a beautiful crystal formation in a cave wall. Perhaps there is an object or creature that looks out of place: a beautiful peacock butterfly fluttering in a grim, dark forest; a half-eaten rat in the corner of a pristine, gilded throne-room; a child's painted toy in the depths of the underdark.

If there are enemies or an NPC in the room, then the roll may well be about them: a scar, striking eyes or ears (or perhaps one less than is usual), a distinctive hairstyle, an interesting birthmark, wart or skin disease. Perhaps the way they move or their posture is unusual: smooth or jerky, upright or hunched, fast or slow, measured or limping. Perhaps there is something unexpected about their clothing, armour or weapons – a goblin wearing a fine red silk scarf, a guardsman wearing only one boot, or a zombie in a bonnet. Any of these would make for a memorable encounter.

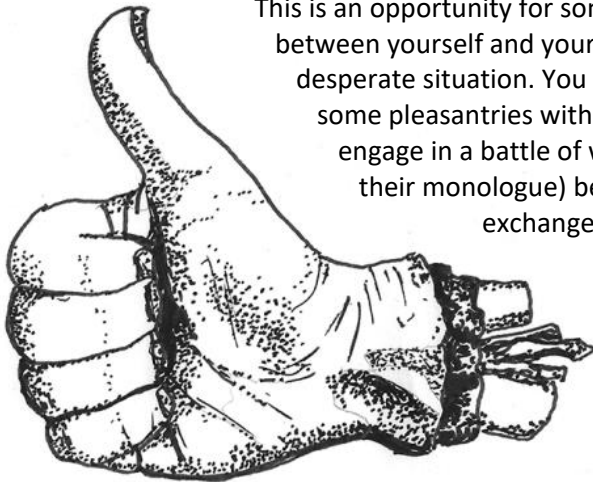
4. **Skin** – most of the time this just means “touch”, and will usually involve the sensation as your fingers touch something in the environment, an enemy, or your own clothing or equipment. However, it might also be something subtle – the brush of something against your face or hair, goosebumps from cold or fear – or something more urgent and visceral such as the searing pain of a wound, or hot blood pouring from torn flesh and sticking your clothes to your body. It's easy to take for granted the sheer range of textures that we encounter, but they are perfect for giving a sense of immersion and embodiment as you imagine yourself in a scene. Even if you are wearing gloves or gauntlets, you will get some sensation of the surfaces you touch.



If you're outdoors the textures will be those of the natural world: tree bark or stone, either rough or smooth. You might feel foliage brushing against your hand or face (or maybe you sweep your hand through a field of wheat, Gladiator-style), or ice-cold river-water (are you drinking, washing?). Maybe the wind blows your hair into your eyes, or sea-spray into your beard, or perhaps you bend down and let the soil or sand slip through your fingers. If you are inside, you might run your hand over rough or polished wood or stone, textiles or metal; perhaps your fingers trace the outline of a pattern or engraving, or you might sense the brush of cobwebs in your hair or the chill draft of air against your face as you open a long-sealed crypt.

In combat, there are all sorts of tactile sensations – the haft of your axe, the hilt of your sword, the hand-numbing impact as your mace hits a shield, the hot spray of an enemy's blood in your face. You might feel the sting of sweat in your eyes, or the bloody slickness of your Sidekick's skin as you lay-on-hands and pull her to her feet. You might feel the dull, throbbing ache of a glancing blow to the head, the sharp-pain of a broken rib or a deep flesh-wound, the general push and shove of melee, or the bone-crunching pressure of grappling.

5. **Social** – this category encompasses speech, facial expressions, gestures and 'emotes' from you, your Sidekick, an NPC or an enemy to you, your Sidekick, an NPC or an enemy. The nature of this communication depends on the context.



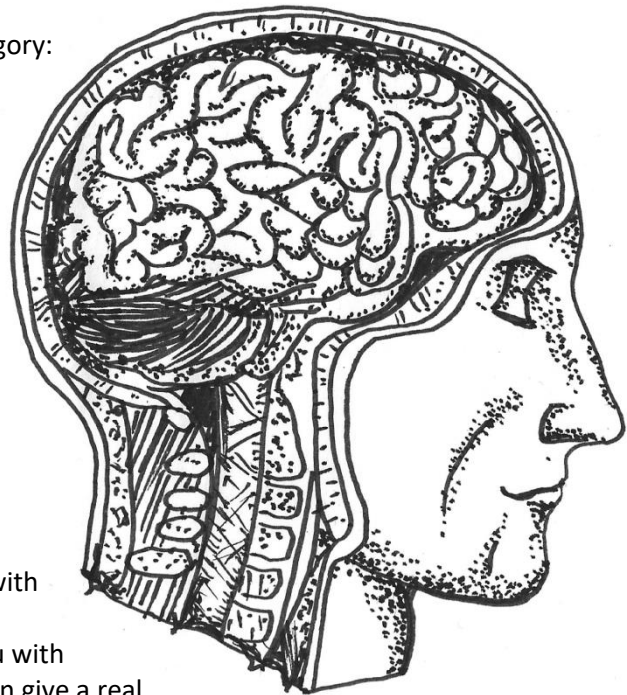
This is an opportunity for some roleplaying. There might be some banter between yourself and your Sidekick, or a serious discussion of your desperate situation. You might exchange a joke with the barman, some pleasantries with the old woman selling fish at the market, or engage in a battle of wits with a boss (or a suppressed yawn at their monologue) before an epic battle begins. You might exchange a nod and wink with your Sidekick before you betray an NPC, or raise an eyebrow and give a hearty laugh when you stumble into a room full of treasure.

In combat, there may be gestures of command or obscenity, expressions betraying fear, hatred, or over-

confidence. From yourself, your Sidekick or your opponents there may be shouting, swearing, taunts, threats and insults (in languages you may be able to understand, or not). If an enemy (or NPC) speaks to you, there may also be something distinctive about their voice – the female orc with the unexpectedly cultured accent, the spindly goblin pleading for his life in a gruff baritone.

6. **Sense** – other sensations not covered elsewhere are dealt with in this last category:

your 'sixth' sense (the feeling of being watched, or that something *bad* is about to happen); your balance and proprioception (awareness of the position and movement of your body); changes in temperature (why is it so cold, suddenly?); the general atmosphere and 'feel' of a place (oppressive, magical, mystical, haunted); memories triggered by the location (a sudden feeling of *déjà vu*, or maybe something jogs a memory of a previous adventure or a childhood event); or a sudden awareness of your own mood or emotion (particularly if it's incongruent with the situation – what is it about being in a crypt surrounded by undead that fills you with inexplicable *joie de vivre*?). Again, this can give a real opportunity for roleplaying, and it's worth reminding yourself of your character's Traits, Ideals, Bonds, Flaws and Backstory to see if there are any useful clues as to what you might be experiencing.



In your interpretation of your rolls you do not have to be limited by the actual contents of the boxed text. If the following location details tell you about an enemy or a feature of the room, then maybe this is the focus of your *Immersion Table* roll. The table can be used at other times as well – in a wilderness encounter with no boxed text, if you find that you're just rolling dice and not feeling the scene, or if you've just taken a break from the game session and are coming back to the table. Basically, any time you find that you are becoming detached from the scene, roll on the Immersion

Table, focus on the aspect you rolled, and immerse yourself back into the action. The same applies if you're just about to enter the big, final encounter of a quest – make an Immersion Roll before it starts to help set the scene and make it a vivid, memorable event.

The *Immersion Table* is useful even to the non-Solo player – I have adopted it for use when DMing as a way of stopping myself from just reading out the boxed text. Also, it's amazing how often the moment of creativity triggered by the immersion roll turns out to be in synchronicity with the story. For example, I rolled a 2 as I entered a village and imagined that I could hear a hammering noise, and the very next thing I read in the adventure talked about the notices nailed to the jobs board outside the Town Hall. Clearly that must be where the noise had come from, so I invented an NPC nailing notices to the board, even though he was not mentioned in the adventure.

There are a couple more things about immersion in general, even when you're not using the Immersion Table. First, *never* just make a roll – *always* imagine and describe what you are actually doing. That is to say, don't just roll a d20 and think "15, that's a hit" or "19, that's a successful Persuade check". Instead, imagine the scene, and/or say to yourself, "I take a wild swing at the orc's misshapen head...<roll dice>...it connects and he lets out a roar of pain as blood sprays against the wall", or "With a wink I say to the trader, 'Come on, you must have a few special items for *regular* customers?'". This can be a difficult habit to maintain, especially at the beginning of your Solo career, but you will get better at it with practice, and it really adds to the solo experience (which, if you're not careful, can degenerate into a soulless exercise in rolling dice and bookkeeping).

Second, always visualise big spells (the coloured lights, the shadows stretching and spinning across the walls as the magic missiles fly through the room, the lightning bolt that momentarily reveals a snapshot image of the hordes you're about to face, the heat of the fireball, the corrosive stench of acid) and big combat rolls (usually criticals you make, but also near-misses – rolls against you that would have been fatal if they'd hit).

Exploration, dungeon maps and simulating fog-of-war

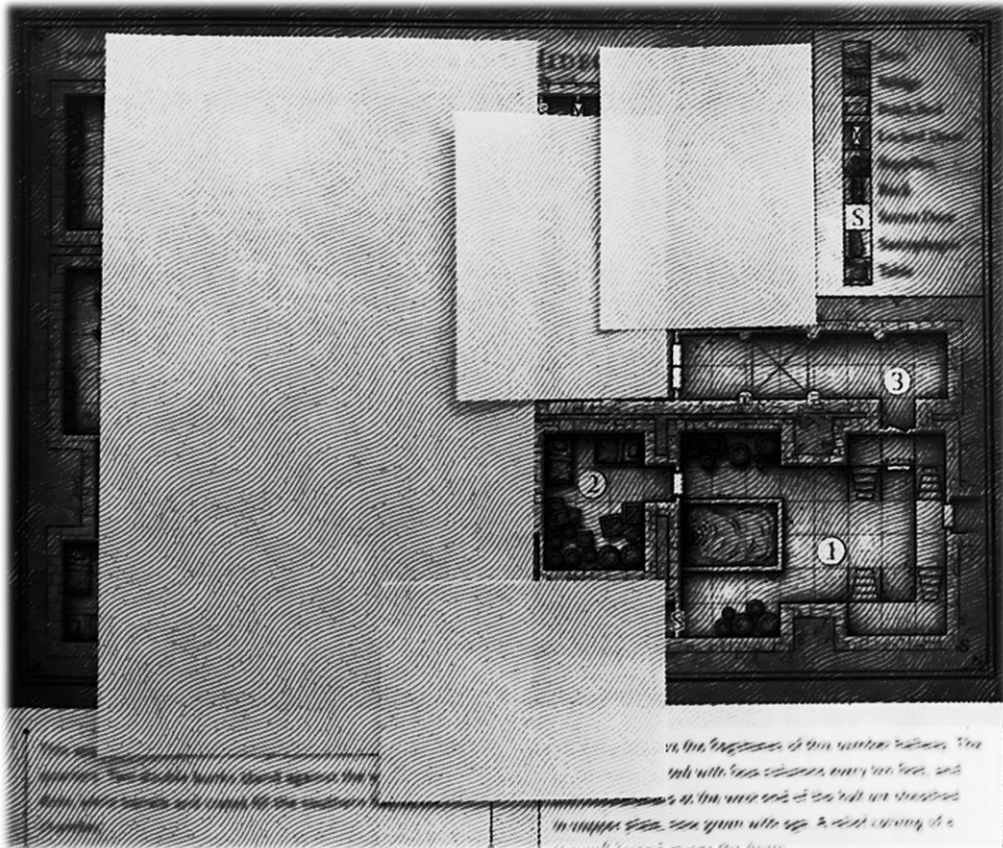
Whenever you start a new quest/map make sure you note down:

- What time it is (in-game). If you log events or the passage of time during the map/quest, you can work out how much time has passed and what time it is when the dungeon is completed. This may be important to know if, for example, you need to decide whether to risk having a long rest there, or face travelling back to the nearest village during the hours of darkness.
Having said all that, don't sweat it if you lose track of time. Use a d12 roll to determine the hour (and a 50/50 roll if you're not sure whether it's before or after noon). Use a similar technique if you need to know other things, such as the phase of the moon (use whatever dice is to hand; the higher the roll, the fuller the moon).
- A one- or two-sentence high-level "statement of intent" for what you plan to do there, and what your plan is for when you're done. This gives you a useful reference if you stumble over spoilers and are unsure what you would have done had you not known that information (for example, if you read that there's an ambush on the way to the place you'd planned to travel to next).

Similar to skim reading, you want to have only the parts of the location map you have already visited visible, and avoid looking at the parts of the map you have yet to explore. Effectively, you want to

create a video-game-style fog-of-war effect on the map page. How you achieve this really depends on what medium you are using for your map:

- The critical thing is that you ‘reveal’ a room on the map **only after** you’ve decided how you’re going to approach it. You want the exits of the room to be clearly visible, but as little beyond that as possible – you don’t want to see where the exits lead.
- If you have a physical, printed copy of the adventure, you can use post-it or similar adhesive notes, ideally in different sizes, to expose the area you’ve explored while keeping the rest of the map covered. Three or four post-its is normally enough to do this.



- If you’re reading a PDF on a digital device, you want the map to be in a separate window to the main text (in Adobe, use the menu option Window > New Window). You can then re-size the PDF reader window of your map and/or zoom the document, so only the area you’ve explored is visible. If you don’t mind looking like a lunatic, you could also stick post-it notes to your screen to obscure any rooms that you can’t conceal by zooming – don’t worry if they don’t lie flat, this actually helps to blur the information underneath.
- If you’re using Roll20, go to the Page Settings for your map, enable Fog of War, and turn Darkness Opacity (GM) right up (I don’t have it *completely* black, because it’s useful to be able to just about make out room borders when you’re revealing areas on the map). There will be a similar option if you are using a different Virtual Tabletop (VTT) such as Fantasy Grounds. You can then use the Fog of War reveal tool to expose the areas you visit.
- Personally, I don’t think it’s worth drawing a map of your own. Unlike in a non-solo game, you have the real map that you’re slowly revealing as you explore. For me, it doesn’t seem worth the time and effort to reproduce that in a drawing, but if you would like to do so (if you keep your own adventure journal, perhaps), go right ahead.

Dead ends can be difficult to deal with when you're playing solo. If you're certain you've explored every non-hidden room you can go round again checking for secret doors, but you have to impose some penalties on yourself for doing this (explained in the section on Logging, Time and Resting). Alternatively, if you don't think it's essential to the adventure that you find whatever is there, you could always leave it and come back on another occasion if it turns out you've missed something vital.

If you're absolutely certain you've missed something that will break the adventure, then you'll have to bite the bullet and read the quest intro in full, but you should avoid this if you can, and you should only act on information you get this way if it will spoil the adventure if you don't (i.e. no going back because you've just read you missed a *Belt of Giant Strength*).

How to *DM Yourself*

To successfully play D&D solo, you need to play two roles – Dungeon Master and Player Character – and you need, to the best of your ability, to keep these roles as separate as possible. As a DM, you need to bring to life all the dangers and secrets of each location, and to play enemies and NPCs as they would actually behave rather than how your PC would like things to be. This can be difficult to do, particularly when you're invested in your character, but this section lays out a number of methods to help you keep things fair and stop yourself bending the rules (and the world) to the benefit of your character. In the rest of this section we'll look at how to successfully act as your own DM across the three pillars of adventuring that make up the D&D game: exploration, social interaction, and combat.

The simplest statement of how to *DM Yourself* goes something like this. Decide what you want to do next; read enough of the adventure to see what that involves and what ability checks are required; make some rolls to see if you succeed. Repeat.

The rest of this Playing Solo section really just explores in detail how to do that for different situations, but it's worth explaining a summary of the core 'game loop'. Typically you will decide how you're going to approach the next location, then reveal that location on the map. Find the corresponding location text in the adventure guide, read the boxed description for the location, and make an immersion roll.

Before going any further you decide what you're going to do in that location, based on the information in the location description. You then act on that description using the full detailed location information to tell you things like the DCs for ability checks you might want to make, or what enemies are in the room. After actually making the checks and/or fighting combats, you decide where you're going to next.

So, most of the time you will just be making ability checks where the DC is given in the adventure (e.g. a Perception check to spot a trap) and running combats. If you want to do something where no DC is given, make a DM call based on the applicable skill and the required DC (using the Typical DC table below). If you think of an alternative approach to a problem that's not listed in the room description you can make a roll to try that, and if you succeed on the roll you can try the actual test shown but with advantage (it's usually too lenient to just allow a straight success on the alternative approach). If all else fails and you want to try something that's not covered at all in the adventure, use the DM Oracle in the appendix.

Task	DC	Task	DC
Trivial	5	Hard	20
Easy	10	Very Hard	25
Moderate	15	Near Impossible	30

Judgement Calls

Before we move on to look at the general rules for running exploration, combat, and social interaction, let's look at a few special cases and examples where you might need to apply some judgement to *DM Yourself*.

Listening at doors is problematic because it requires knowing what's in a room before you enter it. I handle it like this: I make a Perception check (potentially applying disadvantage if I know the door is made of stone or the room I'm currently in is noisy). If the result is less than 10, then I don't hear anything. On a roll of 10 or greater, I try to really lightly skim read the location description to see if there's any source of noise (usually creatures) in the room. Sounds of combat I would rate as DC 10, normal conversation DC 15, solitary or sleeping creatures DC 20.

Stealth is difficult to handle as well. The best way to manage this is to make a note (written or mental) if you are trying to be stealthy, and then make the actual roll once you know what (if anything) is around to perceive you. This is also a good way of doing it because you don't know you've failed to be stealthy until it's too late...

Sometimes the adventure will suggest one way round a problem, but you may think of a different solution. For example, our way is blocked by spinning blades, the damage and DC difficulty are both high, and the obvious way to turn them off – using *Mage Hand* – is not an option for non-magic-users. Although it doesn't mention it in the location description, if I was DMing this I would allow any player who came up with the idea the chance to use an Acrobatics check (DC 15) to jump over the blades, either to bypass them entirely, or at the very least to give them advantage on the DC check to avoid the blades.

We will talk shortly about Binding Decisions, but the important thing to know here is that you must stick with what you would have done, and don't change your mind after reading new or privileged information. For instance, the adventure tells me what happens if I lie to someone about having done what they asked of me. This option hadn't even occurred to me before I read it in the adventure, so it would definitely be not ok to try it after I'd read it was an option. You must be honest with yourself. In this case my character's Traits specifically say he never lies (yes, he's a Paladin), so this wouldn't have been an option anyway, but it also shows the value of having fully written up Traits, Ideals, Bonds and Flaws when it comes to making these sorts of decisions. You always want to have written information telling you how your character will behave, rather than making it up on the fly (where the temptation is to bend things to your character's advantage with the benefit of hindsight).

Sometimes you'll get instructions for the DM like "Place the twelve Orcs around the building as you see fit". A quick glance at the map (without reading the descriptions) shows that there are three big rooms and six small rooms. I decide that I'll roll a d10 for each room on entering it; on a roll of 1 to 7

in a big room, there are that many orcs present, and in a small room on a roll of 1 to 3 it contains that many orcs. Otherwise the room is empty. I'll keep a tally and stop when I get to twelve. Also, it occurs to me looking at the map that a fight in one room may well alert other nearby orcs, so I make a quick ruling before I even enter the building: at the end of each round of combat where the orcs get an action, there's a 25% chance that the ruckus may have been overheard. On a successful roll I'll check adjacent rooms and the room directly overhead to see if there are any orcs there. If there are, they will investigate).

Another scenario: my PC and Sidekick arrive at a quest location. There is a guard in a tower, and no safe way to approach without being seen. The adventure suggests PCs can slip in under cover of darkness, but neither of us has Darkvision so this is not an option. It seems this quest is over before it begins. At this point, however, I make a "DM's Decision" – if I was faced with this situation as DM in a normal game of D&D, I would make sure that the players had at least *some* way of getting past the guard. So I decide there are a few trees and large boulders in the field – enough to get to within 120' (long javelin range) with successful Stealth checks. The guard is probably in half-cover, so it's going to be a tricky shot, but it's not impossible...

As a general rule of thumb, when DMing Yourself (and, in fact, when you are DMing in general), be fair, don't cheat, but also be kind. Do what you would do if you were DMing a game for a group of players. If it's clear an encounter is completely overpowered, take out an enemy or two, or find some other way to rebalance things a little. It's best to spot this in advance before the combat begins if you can, but you can modify things on the fly if necessary – that's what I would do if I was DMing, so that's what I do when playing solo. This is not to say that characters should be invincible, but sometimes you miscalculate and drop the party in an unwinnable combat, and in those circumstances I think it's perfectly acceptable to bend the rules a little. Having said that, it's amazing what a PC and a Sidekick can handle with the right tactics and a bit of luck.

Also, don't feel like you have to play out an encounter to its absolute conclusion. If you have an epic fight and manage to take out the big boss, don't feel you have to spend another half hour grinding through to mop up the remaining minions – just have them run away (or follow the *Lord of the Rings* films' example and have them all fall into a conveniently-shaped hole). When playing solo it's easy to get in the mind-set that you have to do everything exactly as written – by all means play out the combat to its conclusion if you're enjoying yourself, but (to quote a recent gambling awareness ad) when the fun stops, stop.

Minis vs. Theatre of the Mind

At the end of the day, whether you choose to use miniatures and tabletop scenery or take a completely theatre of the mind approach is a matter of personal preference, and very much up to you and your preferred style of play. However, I do have my own views on what works best for solo play, so I will lay them out here – feel free to ignore if you have strong feelings in another direction.

For me, using miniatures and scenery is a bottomless pit of time and money. You need to get the miniatures, and then you have to paint them, and they don't look right unless they're properly based, but then you need the right battle map that matches the layout of the location in the adventure, but it doesn't feel right unless you're got 3D walls – and so on, and so on, ad infinitum. This is why I don't play the excellent solo game *Rangers of Shadow Deep* – the initial outlay just to

get going is so significant, I never get started (except for playing it on Roll20). Also, unless you have a huge collection you're never going to have a mini for every monster in the adventure – and with *DM Yourself* you're not reading the adventure in advance, so you can't even plan for what monsters you're going to face. However, even worse than this is the time and set-up involved in finding the right minis and map/scenery on the fly as you're playing solo. If you were DMing a standard game you'd have them set up in advance, but playing solo it can take five to ten minutes of prep every time you enter a new room or have an encounter, and that *really* breaks immersion.

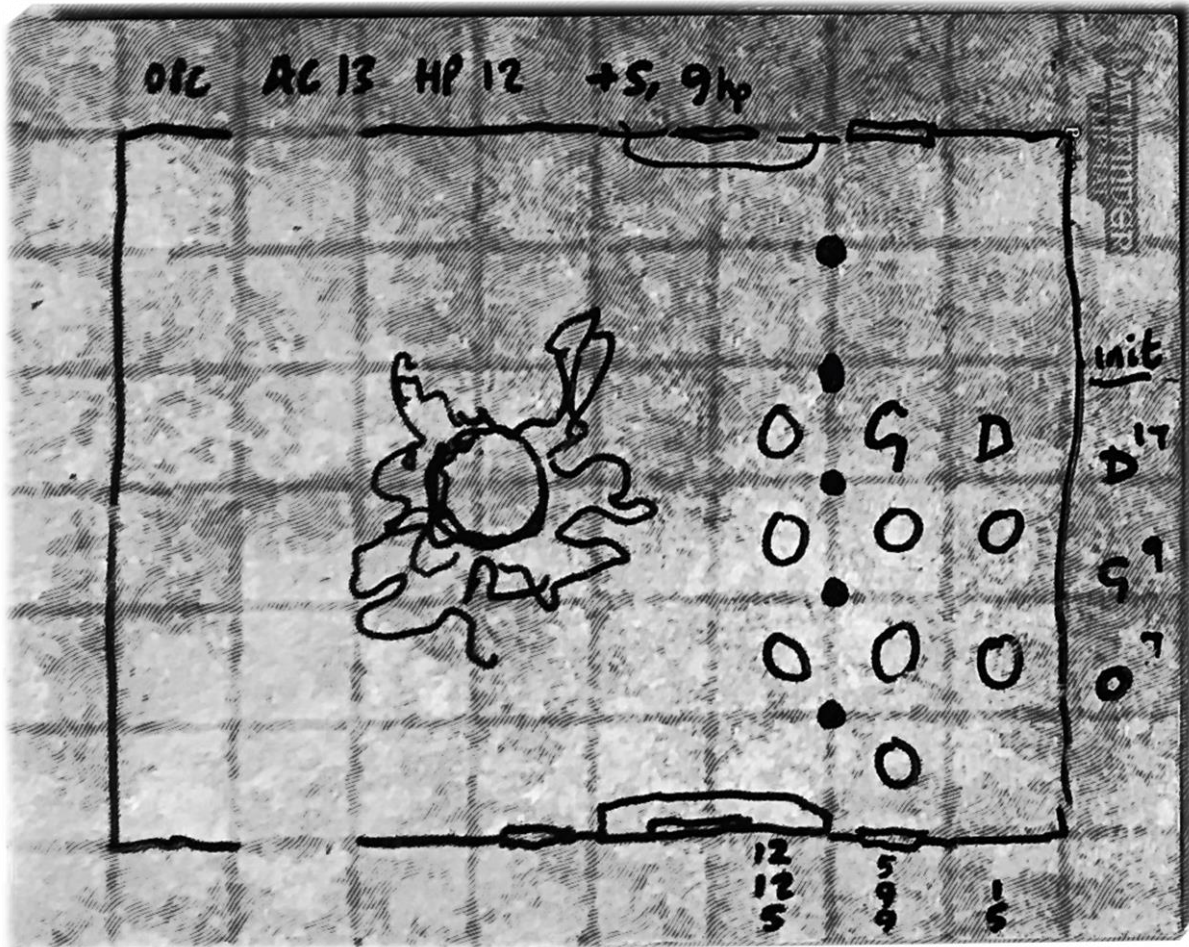
At the other extreme, 5e is generally much better suited for theatre of the mind play (i.e. no miniatures or grid-map) than other recent editions of D&D. A good DM can describe the evolving combat scene in such a way that as a player you've got a clear idea of the relative positions of all the actors and the location. However, there's a large cognitive load involved in this, and playing solo you're acting as both DM and player. Trying to mentally keep track of the locations of all the active parties in a big combat is really tricky. You'll make mistakes, and unlike a standard, non-solo game there's no-one around else to catch these mistakes. So, a 'pure' theatre of the mind approach doesn't really work for solo play.

What I recommend is somewhere between these two extremes. Using a dry-wipe grid and marker, you can quickly draw out the combat map of a room (if required) as you explore. Write the positions of the player characters and enemies directly on the map. If you really want to, you can use tokens for the enemies (ideally put the token in a plastic coin-capsule or laminate it so you can write hit point values on them with your marker) and a miniature for your character and sidekick.

Alternatively you can use a VTT, although this still suffers somewhat from the problem of an immersion-breaking delay while you find the right virtual miniatures and map for an encounter. Personally my preference is for writing everything on a simple dry-wipe mat (I've been using the same *Pathfinder Flip-Mat: Basic* for years). This means that all your information is to hand in the same place, you have a very low table footprint for your game, and it's instantly portable if you need to pack it up and take yourself somewhere else. If you want to get your table footprint even smaller and don't want to shell out the small expense for a proprietary dry-wipe mat, you can just print out and laminate an A4 one inch grid.

At the start of the encounter or combat, write an identifier for each monster and the PC and Sidekick at their position on the map, or on dry-wipe tokens if you're using them – the initial letter or a very short abbreviation of their name usually works well. For reference, write the identifiers and their starting hitpoints as a key at the edge of the map.

For single or boss monsters, change the hitpoints in the key as they get damaged. If you have groups of the same sort of monsters, it's easiest to track them by writing the hp of *damaged* enemies on the grid next to their identifier (or on their token), or on the edge of the map in line with the enemy. Also write conditions etc. next to the monsters or directly on the token, to help you keep track of which goblin is prone, which one is rigid with fear and so on.



My PC **Gyros** and Sidekick **Donna** in a fight with eight **Orcs**. Note the summary of Orc stats at the top of the grid, the Initiative order at the side and the current Orc hitpoints at the bottom (the thing that looks like a giant fried egg is meant to be a well with a tree growing out of it!)

Making Binding Decisions

Binding Decisions are like short-term Default Behaviours – basically a mechanism to stop yourself cheating, a way of committing yourself to a course of action before you’ve read the details of a location. You can make a Binding Decision *before* you read the location text, and this will determine your *approach* to the room (stealthy or fast, do you listen at the door or just break it down, etc.). Then, once you’ve read the location description, you can make a Binding Decision about what you actually do in the room, and finally after you’ve ‘cleared’ the room you can make a Binding Decision about what you’re going to do and/or where you’re going to go next.

This may sound like a lot of effort to go through for each room, but most of the time you can just rely on your Default Behaviours rather than making Binding Decisions, although the latter need not involve anything more than a conscious decision that “this is what I’m going to do” (although if you write it down, it’s less easy to go back on when you realise you’ve made a terrible mistake!). Use this as a structure to fall back on, but you can be much quicker/looser in normal play.

To go through it in detail:

1. As you're about to enter a new location on the map, **before** you reveal the room on the map and read the boxed location text, you should say (out loud or in your head, but it must be a definite statement) and/or write down the answer to the question, "How am I going to approach this room?"
Note that you don't have to do this if your Default Behaviours already cover it – for example, in one non-solo campaign I ran, one of the players decided that his approach to every closed door would be to kick it down!
2. **After** you have read the room description (which should involve a deep read and an immersion roll), but **before** you've gone on and read the detailed (non-boxed) location information, you should make a Binding Decision in answer to the question, "What am I going to do here?" This should be based on features in the room description (e.g. a sarcophagus in the middle of the room, a chimney, a dozen Goblins sitting round a campfire), **but** you cannot base your plans on *hidden* information in the non-boxed location description (e.g. a trap, a secret door, a hidden treasure) that you should not have read yet.
3. After you have 'cleared' the room, i.e. killed the monsters, searched for hidden doors/treasure etc., you should make a Binding Decision on where you're going to go (or what you're going to do) next. Most of the time this is simply which exit you are heading for.

Let's look at an example of this in practice. The title of the location I'm about to enter is "**The Dark Shrine**". Before I enter the room I could make a Binding Decision – but my Default Behaviours already cover what I want to do here, which is "Listen at Doorways", so I don't bother.

I failed my Listen roll, so I just enter the room. I can now reveal the room on the map and read the location description:

The entrance to this desolate stone chamber is covered by an ancient and mouldering curtain of heavy, black velvet. As you enter you feel an unnatural chill in the air. A stone sarcophagus stands in the middle of the room, its lid inscribed with carved runes. In the southwest corner stands an unmoving, gaunt, grey figure dressed in black studded leather. His eyes stare straight ahead, unblinking, and show no reaction to your presence in the room.

Once you've read the boxed location description, you need to stop reading immediately before you read any more of the details about the room. You need to make a Binding Decision about what you want to do here, based on the room description.

For example, from this room description you might decide to:

- Try to read the runes on the sarcophagus
- Try to open the sarcophagus
- Examine the grey figure close-up
- Talk to the grey figure
- Attack the grey figure
- Go straight back out of the room again

You only really need to specify what you do *first*, since that action may affect the other options that are available. Remember, though, that it's too late to change your Binding Decisions and Default Behaviours once you've read the full location description (so if I hadn't decided to search the sarcophagus, it would be too late to do so once I'd read that there were several magical items hidden inside). Therefore, it's often a good idea to describe a multipart action – e.g. “I'll attack the grey figure, and after the combat is over I'll open the sarcophagus”.

Why do it this way, rather than simply waiting until after the combat and then deciding what to do next? The problem with this is that in reading the additional information that tells you how to conduct the fight, you'll need to read the non-boxed location text – which means it's very likely you'll see what (if anything) is in the sarcophagus and what traps (if any) guard it. Once you've seen that information it's too late to make your choice.

It's important that you stick with your Binding Decisions, even if the consequences are potentially fatal. You're only allowed to change your mind if the more detailed location description below the boxed text mentions something that you would have been aware of before you acted, but which the boxed text failed to mention. In this example, if it says in the full description that the sarcophagus is radiating a cold magical energy, you can reconsider your decision to open it. Similarly, if you read the runes and the runes tell you how to open the sarcophagus, you can do that. However, if you decide to open it and find that there's a Vampire inside, it's too late to change your decision.

Using Hindsight

This is an optional rule which can be used to 'soften' exploration and help to balance the strictness required by using Binding Decisions. Sometimes you will make a decision based on the boxed location description, but on further reading you might discover something else about the room. That Wraith was wearing a Ring of Regeneration, but you didn't have “Loot dead enemies” as a Default Behaviours or Binding Decision – or maybe you don't have “Search for Traps” listed as an action, but your party is on single figure hit-points and you're about to walk straight into a magical trap. In cases such as this, you can use Hindsight to receive a chance to act as if you had made that choice before you entered the room.

However, there are limits to using Hindsight:

- You only get 3 uses per long rest
- If the action would normally require a skill check (e.g. a Perception check) you roll with Disadvantage. If the action would not normally require a skill check, you must make a DC10 skill check using the most appropriate skill.

Whether you choose to use the Hindsight rule is up to you. I use it because:

- Default Behaviours and Binding Decisions are a way of stopping yourself cheating when playing solo, but they can be a bit of a blunt instrument. You want to be challenged, but you don't want to remove the fun from the game!
- Personally, it mirrors my DMing style. If my players were about to walk into a deathtrap or blunder straight past an exciting magical item, I would give them at least *some* chance of finding it, no matter how slight. If you're a strict DM, you may frown on such charity!

Logging time and resting

Logging time is an optional rule, but I do recommend it. Whether you choose to do so or not depends on whether you like your rules on the crunchy side, or you'd prefer to keep things loosey-goosey.

If you do decide to log time, you'll need to use a tally system to keep track of the length of time activities take. This is not as arduous as it sounds; we use an abstracted system of time. Remember that you ticked some time-consuming Default Behaviours in character creation? Well, a 'tick' is a unit of time roughly equivalent to 5 minutes. You can ignore activities that take one minute or less – e.g. combat, and movement *between* locations in a building or dungeon.



However, looting bodies, listening at doors, searching for traps/secret doors/treasure etc. all have an associated time cost of one tick, as does each location you enter (to account for looking around and general 'exploration'). So if you have a Default Behaviour that gets triggered in the location (e.g. "I will always loot the bodies of my enemies"), that costs a tick. If you make a Binding Decision that takes more than a minute, that also costs a tick.

Each time an hour passes (= 12 ticks), roll a d20 and make a **Time Passes** check:

d20	Result
1-15	Nothing happens
16-18	Disadvantage on next Surprise check or Initiative Roll
19-20	Wandering Monster

The Initiative and Surprise effects are to simulate you spending enough time in the dungeon that its occupants have become aware of your presence and had time to prepare. The Wandering Monster result means that you have been stumbled upon by one or more enemies.

It may be that the adventure has a wandering monster table or equivalent, in which case you should use that, or else you can use the Random Encounter rules and Monster Lists in the DMG (pp. 85–87, 302–305), or the tables in Paul Bimler's Solo Adventurer's Toolbox. If all else fails, use 1d3 enemies of a type you've already encountered in the dungeon (but make them relatively low level; ideally wandering monsters should be a nuisance and a resource drain, rather than deadly in their own right).

It's also important to have a framework to handle resting during solo play. The scenario will often indicate 'safe' locations for resting – as a DM I'm usually pretty unsubtle about giving clues about such locations to my players – but if you want you can have your PC or Sidekick make a Survival check to notice that it would be a good place to hole up. If you choose to rest in a location that is not specified as safe, then an hour passes – that's 12 ticks and a Time Passes check (do this in the middle of your short rest unless you had no ticks accumulated when you started the rest). Ideally you should only be taking one short rest a day, and certainly no more than two short rests.

It's up to you how you want to handle long rests during travel. Personally I find that the Random Encounter rules in the DMG tend to produce too many encounters when travelling (rolling a d20 once during the day and once during the long rest at night, with an encounter on an 18+). Instead, I let the PC or Sidekick make a Survival roll in order to find a safe place to rest – DC 10/15/20 for safe, normal, or dangerous territory respectively. If they make the Survival roll they won't have an encounter during the night; if they fail the roll, use the Random Encounter rules as you would normally.

One final point on the subject of time: some adventures will feature deadlines or against-the-clock situations. You can use the time-logging tick system to keep track of time to see whether you meet a strict deadline. For a rough one you can use a deck of cards or dice rolls in order to determine when the event happens. For example, if you know an event is going to happen in the next 12 hours, each time a tick passes roll a d12 and the event happens on a 1, or draw from a deck of 12 cards including one Ace and the event takes place if you draw that Ace.

Secrets, traps and puzzles

Secrets and traps are like small-scale, short-term spoilers. For example, you read in the location description that an Ankheg bursts out of the ground to attack anything that comes within 20ft of it, or there's a trap that fires a poison dart at anyone who steps on the loose flagstone. Now, as a solo player, you have a dilemma. Would your PC have walked over the trap, or would they have taken a different route? If they had walked over it, would they have noticed it before they triggered it?

There are two independent aspects to this dilemma – first, whether you encounter the trap at all, and second, if so, whether you notice it before you trigger it. There is a phenomenon used in town planning and game design known as *desire paths/lines*. This is where people on foot usually take the quickest route from A to B, rather than a route that has been laid out for them by thoughtful designers – explaining why you'll often see a path worn across the corner of the grass where tarmac paths form a cross.

In a dungeon, you can draw an imaginary line from the way you came into a room to the exit you plan to take, and see if it crosses the position of the trap. If you've searched specific places in a room you'll need to trace lines between those places, and if you've searched the whole room you need to assume you've walked *everywhere* in it. Outside, you'll usually follow paths if they're shown on your map, or take a straight-line route otherwise. So in the case of the Ankheg, if the path through the location passes within 20ft of it, your PC will definitely trigger it.

If there is any ambiguity about whether your path crosses a trap or comes within triggering distance of an encounter, make a 50/50 check using a dice or flip a coin. As for noticing the trap, if you have a Default Behaviour or have made a Binding Decision to check for traps, you get to make a Perception

check – the DC will usually be stated in the adventure, but if not, make it 15 or 20 depending on how obvious you think the trap is. If you don't have "Check for Traps" as a stated action, then unless your Passive Perception is high enough, you're won't even have a chance to notice the trap before you trigger it – or in the case of the Ankheg, you'll be surprised by it at the start of the combat.

If there's more than one thing to be found in the room, the best way to handle it depends on how exactly your Default Behaviour/Binding Decision is stated. If it says something non-specific like "Search the room after clearing it", make a single Perception check, and if you succeed make another roll to decide what you find. For example – I know from the location description that there is a secret door and a spell book in the room. I succeed in my Perception check. I decide that on a d6 roll of 1-2 I find the door, on a 3-4 I find the book, on a 5-6 I find both.

If your action is "Always search chests, chimneys, drawers and cupboards", you'll find whatever is in those locations on a successful test. If it's "Thoroughly search every room", you can make a Perception check for *each* hidden item, but you will have to spend a *long* time doing it, and you will stand a correspondingly high chance of additional encounters (see pg. 33).

It's important to let things go if you miss them. No coming back to do a sweep of the location with Detect Magic once all the enemies are dead, just because you saw a hidden Holy Avenger mentioned in a location description but failed the Perception roll to find it when you were in the room.

Puzzles are a really difficult thing to get working in solo play (unless they are riddles, in which case it's pretty straightforward). There are three possible solutions here, and you really need to choose which fits best on a case-by-case basis:

- **Write a step-by-step solution prediction:** this is a bit like making a Binding Decision, but for the puzzle. This works best where the puzzle is clearly marked in the adventure text, and ideally given as a step-by-step breakdown. You don't have to give the entire solution at the beginning.

As an example, let's say you find an alcove with seven identical pedestals, the first of which supports a red gem-encrusted skull. At this stage you might make a note to "Find skulls to put on each of the pedestals", before you've even started reading the puzzle description. After you find the first couple of skulls and discover that one is yellow and another is blue, at that stage you might add "Place the skulls in rainbow order". When you actually start placing skulls you can read the puzzle until you get to the line that tells you what happens if you place the skulls as you have (and suffer the consequences, or gain the rewards).

- **Roll to solve the puzzle using your character's intelligence:** this is the most general-purpose solution, but also the least satisfying one. In some ways, though, it does fix an issue which D&D has had since day one, which is that you might be a genius, but you're playing an idiot Half-Orc Barbarian with an Intelligence of 8 – it makes no sense that he would ever be able to solve the puzzle. Less often you might have the opposite problem: you're an idiot, but you're playing a genius Elven Wizard with an Intelligence of 20. You haven't got a clue what the solution is, but your character would solve it in seconds.

Sometimes the adventure will include a DC to give hints for the puzzle; if it doesn't, read the puzzle yourself and rate it with a DC between 10 (easy) and 25 (very hard), and then make an Intelligence check (or an Investigation check, if you feel the puzzle is exploratory or mechanical rather than logical).

- **Substitute a different puzzle:** replace the puzzle with one that you can solve online (e.g. at a site like puzzlepicnic.com), in an app (e.g. Andrea Sabbatini's Logic Games), in a book (e.g. Alex Bellos' Puzzle Ninja), or a physical puzzle that you possess (e.g. one from Smart Games or Thinkfun). If you can, try to match at least some aspect of the adventure puzzle in your chosen replacement.



If a puzzle involves a physical collection aspect (as in the skulls puzzle above), you still need to do that in order to complete the puzzle, even if you're 'solving' the puzzle using an alternative method.

Finally, you might encounter things like deductive secrets or traitors. It's difficult to give a set of rules for these because every situation is different, but you can play them in a similar way to puzzles – write down your suspicions, and/or use your character's Insight checks. If you accidentally see the identity of the traitor, you have to treat them normally (no Insight checks) until they have done something to betray themselves.

Scaling enemies

This was covered in Character Creation, but it's worth repeating the main points here:

- When you're being attacked, instead of *rolling* for damage you take from successful attacks against you, take the average damage shown in the monster stat block.
- Enemies *do not* do double damage on a critical hit.
- Enemies start the combat with $\frac{3}{4}$ of their normal (stat block) hit points (rounded up). For example, a Bugbear normally starts with 27hp. Bugbears under the *DM Yourself* rules have 21hp.
- Most enemies will attempt to flee from combat if they are reduced to a third of the hit points they started the fight with. For example, the Bugbear above will try to flee combat if it is reduced to 7hp or less.

- *Optional low hp rule:* this probabilistic rule adds to the fiddliness of combat, but makes your opponents more unpredictable. If you don't want to know in advance exactly when they will flee, when they fall below *half* the hit points they started the fight with, flip a coin at the start of their turn before they choose their behaviour. On tails, they count as having low hp and will attempt to flee (no need to flip a coin on future turns unless they get back above half hit points). On heads, they ignore the low hp trigger – flip the coin again next turn. Whether or not you use this rule depends on if you prefer your rules smooth or crunchy – do you like your combats simple and speedy to resolve, or more realistic and unpredictable?

Starting the Encounter

At the start of a combat encounter, at the very least you'll need to know what range to start the encounter at, where the combatants are, and whether anyone is surprised. In most cases you should be able to work these things out from a combination of the location description and the dungeon map.

If it's not clear from the location description where the enemies and/or what the situation is, you can use these quick rules of thumb. To be clear – only use these if a particular element of the encounter is not obvious from the location description and/or the player actions (e.g. if the encounter takes place in an open field, there's no chance of cover):

- If you're in a numbered location in an indoors/dungeon/cave environment, the enemies are arranged in the centre of the numbered location.
- If you're in an outdoors environment, they're 2d10x10 feet away.
- *Optional:* At the start of combat, if their current situation is not clear from the context (i.e. they're running towards you or they're already in cover), roll a d12 for your target before you make an attack. On a 10-11 they're in half cover, on a 12 they're in three-quarters cover.
- *Optional:* Before combat starts, if the surprised/alertness status of the encounter is not clear from the location description or other factors, make a d12 roll for the enemies. On a 1 they're automatically surprised, on a 2 they're caught off-guard and roll initiative with disadvantage, on an 11 they're alert and roll initiative with advantage, and on a 12 they automatically surprise the adventurers.
(Note: Why use a d12? Well, mainly because they are the coolest of all dice and criminally underused in 5e, and also because it's less likely you'll confuse this roll with an initiative roll.)

Similar to using flashbacks, it's also worth bearing in mind that it can often be a useful dramatic technique to start an encounter *in media res*. Indeed, sometimes this is a necessity – for instance, *you* may have read that there's an attack on the village in the night, but the first thing your player knows about it is when the door of the tavern is smashed in and they lurch out of bed while making an initiative roll. By the way, if you do start an encounter in the middle of the action, it's always worth making an immersion roll to get you into the scene.

You should make your decisions about how you're going to approach the combat before you've looked at the non-boxed text (which may, for instance, give away the fact that the enemies are lying in wait for you, or that they're asleep), and before you've looked at the monster stat-block. Of

course, you can change your mind about your tactics after a round or two, once you've had a chance to assess the strengths and weaknesses of your opponent.

Then set the encounter up on your floor-plan or dry-wipe grid, and you're ready to go.

Combat and enemy behaviour

There's nothing to stop you trying to run the combat as if you were DMing normally. You could read about the monster's statistics and actions, and look up their tactics and behaviour in the Monster Manual (MM), Volo's Guide to Monsters (VGM) or The Monsters Know What They're Doing (TMKWTD). Although these are all fantastic resources, however, overall there are two reasons why I wouldn't recommend this approach:

- In a non-Solo game, a good DM will have prepared the combat in advance, read up on the monsters and their behaviour, and gone straight into an interesting encounter (disclaimer : that's what a *good* DM does. Quite often I am unprepared, and simply make the monsters run into melee until they get killed by the players). In solo play, however, it totally breaks immersion and reduces the speed of play to a crawl if you're having to look everything up.
- No matter how hard you try, it's very difficult to be even-handed in a combat where you have an emotional investment in one side. You don't want to have to *choose* the monster's behaviour – it's much better to have some sort of system doing it for you.

In the appendix you will find a number of tables for how different types of monsters react in combat. By no means do these tables capture the full range or subtlety of monster behaviour, but they do provide a very quick way of describing automated behaviour which models at least some of the nature of that particular enemy. Below is the *generalised* form of the table, which we'll use here to demonstrate how it works. (It will also be useful if you can't be bothered to look up the particular monster, or the one you're looking for is not listed in the appendix.)

This combat table acts as a 'sieve'. Each round, on the enemy's Initiative, you start at the top and go down until the 'trigger' is true. Then read across to the appropriate column to see what the enemy does that turn. If multiple triggers are true, you only act on the first one that's true as you go down the first column.

Important: If an enemy does not have any attacks at the specified range, skip that trigger!

Because the table contains a lot of information, certain terms are abbreviated. These are explained below the table

Trigger	General	Melee Specialist	Ranged/Magic-User
If low hp	Disengage/Dash, Move away	Disengage/Dash, Move away	Disengage/Dash, Move away
If within melee+	Move to nearest, Melee	Move to nearest, Melee	If already within Melee range, Melee; otherwise Move to optimal, Ranged
If within ranged+	Move to optimal, Ranged	n/a	Move to optimal, Ranged
Otherwise	Dash, Move towards	Dash, Move towards	Move to cover, Ready Ranged

- **low hp:** on 33% hp or less of starting hp (or use the optional probabilistic low hp rule)
- **melee+:** the sum of the enemy's speed and melee range (basically, can it get close enough to carry out a melee attack this turn). If shown in the action column, this means "move to within melee range of the nearest target then **Melee**"
- **ranged+:** the same as melee+ but for ranged attacks, using the normal (not long) range. Note that these could be physical or magical attacks (*remember to skip this trigger if this enemy has no ranged attacks it can use*). If shown in the action column, this means "move to within normal range of the nearest target then **Ranged**"
- **n/a:** ignore this trigger for this creature – go on to the next trigger
- **A, B:** do action A then action B
- **A/B:** do action A if applicable, otherwise do action B
- **Melee:** when choosing the attack, choose the first available option in this list: offensive Rechargeable ability (e.g. Breath Weapon), most powerful offensive spell or ability (highest level status or damage spell affecting the most targets), Multiattack, most damaging melee attack
- **Ranged:** when choosing the attack, choose the first available option in this list: offensive Rechargeable ability (e.g. Breath Weapon), most powerful offensive ranged spell or ability (highest level status or damage spell affecting the most targets), most powerful physical or ability ranged attack
- **Nearest:** the nearest target that the creature can get to and attack
- **Optimal:** a position as far as possible from any enemies while still within normal (not long) range of the target. Given a choice of possible positions, choose the one that can target more than one enemy (for Breath Weapons and area of effect spells) and/or is behind cover
- **Disengage:** this usually means the Disengage action, but if the creature has spells and/or abilities that will take them out of combat (e.g. *Misty Step*), they will use those instead.
- **Otherwise:** this is the default action that takes effect if none of the others are relevant (basically, if the creature can't get into position to attack). Note that although some creatures hide and stay at range as their "Otherwise" action, they will stop doing this (and Dash, then Move towards their attacker instead) if they have been successfully spotted and attacked.

If an ability is shown that the particular creature does not have (e.g. Fly or Multiattack) then just move or attack normally instead.

If an enemy is in its lair and has Lair Actions, remember to do one at Initiative count 20 every turn (choose one at random, unless one option is clearly better than the others in the current context). If the enemy has Legendary Actions, do the most powerful available (usually one that costs multiple actions – choose randomly if it's is not clear which one to use) at the end of each opponent's turn.

Let's look at an extended example.

We arrive at a location to discover a flying Manticore trying to break down the door of a hilltop tower. Looking at its INT score the Manticore is none too bright, and it's occupied with its current activities, so I decide we get surprise if we start combat at range or if we move to within melee

range with a successful Stealth check versus the Manticore's PP. I decide to start combat at a range of 80' (just within Shortbow normal range), getting a surprise round and landing an arrow hit. After making Initiative rolls, the Manticore acts next, so it's time to decide what it does.

The MM and TMKWTD says it stays aloft until it has fired all its tail spikes, but if I don't have the time or inclination to consult those sources we can look at the Beasts and Monstrosities table (in the AI Combat Tactics section of the appendix). The Manticore has $\frac{3}{4}$ of its normally stated hp (51 instead of 68), so it will fly away if its hp drops below 33% of its new amount (i.e. a low hp threshold of 17hp).

It is still well above that threshold, so we look at the next row on the table – is it within **melee+** range? That is to say, if it moved towards us, could it get within range to carry out a melee attack with its action?

The answer to this is 'no', so we look at the next row: is it within **ranged+**? It's 80' away, and its Tail Spike attack has a range of 100' (note that its **ranged+** is actually 150', because it has 50' of movement when flying), so the answer to this is 'yes'.

We scan across this row to the Monstrosity column to see what it does: "Move to Optimal, Charged/Spell/Ranged". Move to Optimal means that the Manticore moves to a position where it is as far away as possible while still being within normal ranged attack range – i.e. it flies 20' further away, so it is now 100' away. It has no charged or spell abilities so it uses its ranged attack, Tail Spike, to attack the closest target (or choose randomly if equidistant).

It will carry on doing this every round unless it falls to 17hp or less (in which case it will fly away), starts its turn within **melee+** range (in which case it will move to and Multiattack the nearest enemy), runs out of tail spikes, or is more than 150' away (in which case it will use its Dash action and fly 100' towards the nearest enemy).

Ending the Encounter

Hopefully the encounter ends 'cleanly' with one side dead or incapacitated – ideally not you. Consult your Binding Decisions/Default Behaviours, and if appropriate loot bodies, search the room etc.

However, because in *DM Yourself* the monsters (or, occasionally, the PCs) might flee, encounters can end in a chase. Most of the time one side will be running at full speed (using Dash and Move) while the other will be attacking those fleeing (using Move and Ranged/Spells). These pursuits will naturally end after a few rounds when those fleeing either die or move out of range. However, I recommend playing out a maximum of three rounds of pursuit. Unless you're outside on the plains your quarry will find cover long before they're out of range, and if you're in a 'dungeon'-type environment it is likely that fairly soon the pursuit will run into a previously unexplored area. This can be a dangerous situation for the players.

In cases where pursuers don't have ranged attacks, or where they are trying to catch rather than kill those they're pursuing, chases can easily stagnate with everyone moving at the same speed. Extended chases are most likely to happen in an open environment like a city or the wilderness. There are chase rules on pp 252-255 of the DMG, but these are quite complex and not particularly suited to solo play. A simpler, more abstract system can be used, as follows.

Make a series of ability checks – each one must be with a different skill, but you can choose what skill you use, as long as you can justify it and ‘narrate’ it (i.e. you wouldn’t normally be able to use ‘Religion’, but you might if you were involved in a pursuit through a temple). Most checks are opposed by the same check from the person you’re pursuing or being pursued by – e.g. Athletics vs. Athletics – except that Perception is always opposed by Stealth (and vice versa) and Deception is opposed by Insight (ditto – though you’ll need to be creative to work out how you use these in a pursuit). You can also use a ranged attack as one of your checks (if you hit, it counts as a success but does no damage).

Keep making checks until you have succeeded three times in total, in which case you were successful and caught your quarry, or you’ve failed three times or run out of ideas for abilities to test (in which case you have failed and lost them). Make use of Advantage/Disadvantage depending on environmental context and the enemies involved (e.g. Goblins are going to get Advantage on most escape rolls). Note that you can use this system whether you’re doing the pursuing or being pursued.

Towns and NPCs



When you arrive at a settlement, it is often obvious whether it is a generally known/safe location (such as the village/town that acts as the base for an adventure), in which case we can assume that most if not all of the locations are known (or at least knowable) to the player, or a larger city or hostile settlement where the players will have to be careful in their explorations and many of the locations may be secret, or quests in their own right.

For small/safe settlements, you are free to look at the town map and allow yourself as much exploration of the map as you want. However, you should decide (and, ideally, log) where you visit first, what you do there, and then read/play that location before moving onto the next, rather than just reading through the location descriptions one after another. If the town has more than half a dozen locations, or the characters are under time pressure, assume each location takes half an hour to explore.

For larger/unsafe towns and cities, treat them like a dungeon using fog-of-war to reveal the map (see pg. 25), and treat each location like a dungeon room (in terms of how you read the descriptions, etc.)

Try to give each NPC a unique voice/mannerism, even if it’s only in your head (although you do get bonus points and extra immersion if you say the NPC’s lines out loud). For example, if a roll on the rumours table shows that ‘the innkeeper tells you the village has been having trouble with orcs from the nearby mountains’, actually imagine him saying the words. What’s his voice like, how does he move as he speaks? I imagine him saying the words haltingly, with anxiety, in a voice deepened by

years of smoke and alcohol; he shakes his head as he cleans a tankard with a grubby cloth: “Bloody orcs, coming down from the mountains... I swear it gets worse each year.”

Assume that in safe/base settlements, in general most NPCs are well-disposed to the PC unless the adventure specifies otherwise. That doesn't mean that you can instantly read the entire contents of the Tales/Gossip/Rumours table; you still need to play out the interactions with the NPCs, but in the absence of any other guidance given in the adventure, assume that each interaction will reveal one piece of information without you having to roll for it.

Dealing with Guards, Monsters etc. is a different matter entirely. Again, if there's specific guidance given in the adventure as to what rolls to make and their difficulty, use that. However, if no such guidance is given, use these simple rules (note there *are* rules given for social interaction in the DMG on pp. 244-245, but they are not well-suited for solo play).

1. Talk through the start of the interaction – what do you say to them? How do you say it? Imagine and play out the lines of conversation – yours, your Sidekick's and the NPC's – in your head, rather than just making a Persuasion check.
2. Decide if the interaction counts as Persuasion, Intimidation or Deception (this distinction should be obvious depending on what you say to the NPC – it is not enough to simply decide that you'll use Intimidation because that's your best ability).
3. How big/difficult is the thing you're trying to Persuade/Intimidate/Deceive them about? The adventure may well probably provide the DC for the roll itself, but if not, use the general Task Difficulty table below, depending on the risk or sacrifice involved for the person you're talking to:

Difficulty	DC	Risk/Sacrifice
Trivial	5	None, and task is beneficial to listener
Easy	10	No risk or sacrifice
Moderate	15	Trivial risk or sacrifice
Hard	20	Minor risk or sacrifice
Very Hard	25	Major risk or sacrifice
Nearly Impossible	30	Very high chance of death (or worse)

Don't waste time agonising over what DC to assign. For example, if you can't decide whether it should be a moderate or a hard task, simply flip a coin or roll a d6 to make a 50/50 decision. If you get really stuck, you can use the DM Oracle in the appendix to decide on the DC of the task; in this case, if the subject being discussed is big/difficult, make the Oracle roll with disadvantage.

4. Decide whether the roll is a straightforward d20 roll, or whether you get advantage or disadvantage. This depends on the type of roll you're making. If it's a Persuasion check, you're likely to get advantage if the NPC is already well-disposed towards you and the thing you're trying to persuade them to do will also benefit them. On the other hand, if the NPC is

already hostile and you try to persuade them to do something against their own interests, you will be at a disadvantage. With Intimidation, having significantly greater numbers and/or strength on your side than the NPC's will give you advantage, or disadvantage if that situation is reversed. With Deception, a plausible lie may give you advantage, especially if it is backed up with 'proof', whereas an implausible story where the NPC has reason to suspect the contrary will result in you being at a disadvantage. One important point to remember is that if you award yourself advantage, you must state/write how/why you gained it.

5. Depending on the success/failure and scale thereof, play out the rest of the conversation.

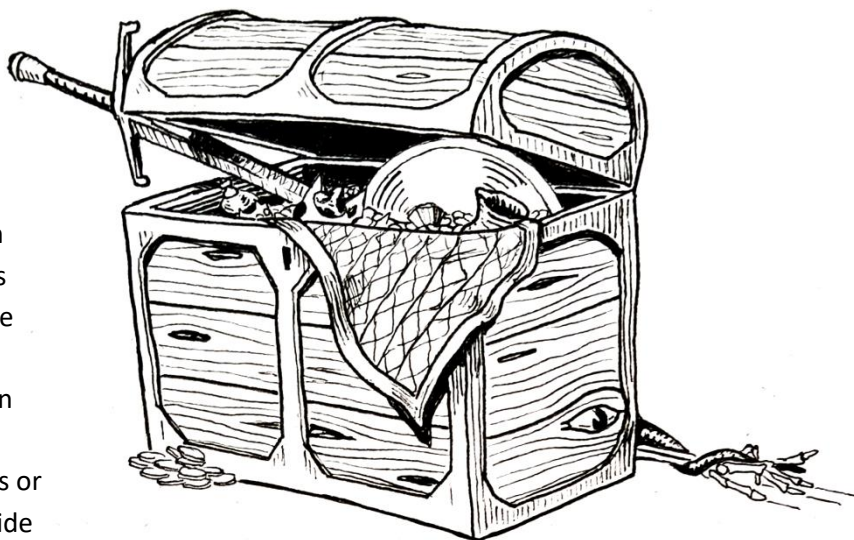
One final thing to consider when dealing with NPCs and conversations is that as with a physical dead-end in a dungeon, a failure on a social roll to gain vital information can bring your adventure to a grinding halt. If there's really no other way for the adventure to continue without that information, you may convert that "No" to a "No, but..." – i.e. give the player another way to acquire the information, but at a (potentially terrible) cost. Think of circumstances that might induce the NPC to change their mind, and make sure your player pays the price financially, emotionally or physically in order to achieve it.

Treasure and Rewards

The main thing to remember here is that you split everything with your Sidekick. For every magic item you keep, they also get one (of roughly similar rarity/value). Gold and gems are divided between you equally. Given that you are playing adventures devised for 4 or 5 players, you're still going to be making a hefty profit. Note that although this means you get effectively twice the amount of treasure and magic items that you would normally, you are *not* allowed to do what some solo-RPGers and friendly DMs do and tailor the magical items you find to your character's needs. You may find a lot of magical items, but only a few will be of any use to you.

If you're selling mundane items, you get half the list cost in the PHB. Remember that weapons and armour dropped by monsters are rarely in good enough condition to be sold. Selling magic items is a trickier process – use the guide on pg. 130 of the DMG, but instead of the base prices shown there I recommend using those found in the Sane Magical Prices or Discerning Merchant's Price Guide

PDFs (at time of writing, both of these are available for free online).



There is a clear risk associated with selling to a 'shady buyer' – if you do so, roll a d100 and add the roll modifier shown on the Saleable Magic Items table depending on the item's rarity (DMG, pg. 130). On a roll of 25 or less, the buyer disappears with your item and you get nothing. If you want to keep things simple, in a large town or city you can assume you will always be able to find a magic shop which will immediately buy your magic items for 10% of their base cost.

Shops selling healing potions can be found even in small towns. In larger towns and cities you might be able to find a shop selling a small selection of magical items. Use the table below to see what's available in the settlement – if your Treasure Hoard roll shows no magic items, then the shops currently have nothing in stock (apart from healing potions). Once you have checked for magical items in stock, you cannot check in the same town or city again for at least a week:

Settlement	Magic Items Available to Buy
Small Town	Healing (50gp) and Greater Healing (150gp) Potions only
Large Town	Roll on Treasure Hoard: Challenge 0-4 (DMG pg. 137)
City	Roll on Treasure Hoard: Challenge 5-10 (DMG pg. 137)

If you want to buy spellcasting services, these can also be found in any town or city – assume that you can always find someone to cast a Level 1 or 2 Wizard or Cleric spell, at a cost of (spell level + d3)x10gp plus the cost of any consumed material components. Finding someone to cast higher level spells is more difficult – make an Arcane (for Wizard spells) or Religion (for Cleric spells) check, with DC 10 + (2 x spell level). If you know the town or city well (e.g. if you've lived there for more than a month) you can roll with advantage; if it's a small town, roll with disadvantage. Once you've tried and failed to find someone to cast the spell in that location, you cannot try there again for at least another month. Spells above Level 2 are much more expensive; use the following formula: $\text{spell level squared} \times 10 + (\text{consumed materials cost} \times 2) + (\text{non-consumed materials cost} \times 0.1)$.

Finally, don't forget to pay for daily living expenses – I usually make things easy by just assuming this is 1gp per day (you can assume that your Sidekick pays their own expenses). Obviously if you choose an aristocratic lifestyle, this cost will increase greatly – use the guide on pp. 157-158 of the PHB.

Experience and Levelling-Up

If the adventure (or a combat/encounter within the adventure) awards a total amount of XP to be divided between the PCs, then take $\frac{3}{4}$ of that XP and divide it equally between yourself and your Sidekick. This means you'll earn 1.5 times the XP you would if you were a PC in a party of four. If the adventure awards an amount of XP *per character*, then award yourself and your Sidekick 1.5 times that amount. If the adventure uses Milestones, level up your PC and Sidekick so they are always one level higher than that recommended for the milestone.

End of the Adventure

Speaking of experience: congratulations, you have finished the *DM Yourself* adventure and gained enough experience to level up!

When I started writing this document, I hoped it would be an all-singing, all-dancing guide to finding your way around – the Google Maps of playing D&D 5e solo. Instead, I feel like I've delivered a handful of notes and a poorly-drawn map with a cross marked "Here Be Dungeons & Dragons". However, I hope my pointers will be of some use to you in your solo adventures. Certainly it takes practice, and you might find your first few outings don't run smoothly, but part of playing solo is letting go of the expectations you may have developed from traditional group sessions. It's not the same as roleplaying in a group – nothing can replicate that experience – but I hope I've offered you a fun and interesting way to explore written adventures and create some amazing stories of your own.

Have fun with the system, and good luck!

Appendices

A Minimal DC Oracle (for situations not covered in the adventure)

The adventure will usually give the DC for a particular task, but what if it doesn't, or what if you want to try a different approach not listed in the adventure? As explained in the section on *How to DM Yourself*, the ideal solution is for you to make a judgement based on the location description, but there will be situations where you want to do or ask about things that are not mentioned in the adventure, or judge an NPC's answers in a conversation where a simple Persuade roll doesn't give the level of detail you require. There are many existing systems such as the *Mythic GM Emulator*, but I think that is unnecessarily complex for our requirements in *DM Yourself*, where the basic adventure is already laid out. *Elminster's Guide to Solo Adventuring* is an excellent and rather simpler system, but I wanted something even more minimal. This is where the *Minimal DC Oracle* (MinDCO) comes in.

Phrase whatever you want to know as a question – e.g. “Can I get up to a high enough viewpoint to see what's going on in the fortified village?”, “Does the courtier know where the Queen is?”. Then, decide whether there are any minor or major factors at play that might influence the result, and finally roll a d6 on the table below.

Minor factors: this works like advantage or disadvantage with a d20 roll. Each factor gives you an extra dice, but positive and negative minor factors cancel each other out. Unlike the d20 system, the number of factors each way is important – e.g. if there are two positive minor factors (for the first question above – it's a bright moonlit night, you're at the edge of a forest full of tall trees) and one negative one (your character suffers from vertigo), you'll end up rolling one extra d6 with advantage (i.e. roll 2d6 and take the highest result)

Major factors: each positive factor (e.g. for the second question above – the castle is on fire) modifies the final result by +1, each negative factor (the queen swore the courtier to secrecy on pain of death) modifies the final result by -1.

You can also use the Oracle when you're really not sure what the DC should be for a task – again, take minor and major factors into account, and then roll to see what the DC is for the roll.

D6	Result	Examples	Task DC
1 (or less)	No, and...	You don't get what you wanted, and things are worse than you imagined	30 (Nearly Impossible)
2	No	You don't get what you wanted	25 (Very Hard)
3	No, but...	You don't get what you want, but there's a consolation	20 (Hard)
4	Yes, but...	You get what you wanted, but there's a complication or a price to pay	15 (Moderate)
5	Yes	You get what you wanted	10 (Easy)
6 (or more)	Yes, and...	You get what you wanted, and it's even better than you'd hoped	5 (Trivial)

Finally, sometimes you'll need to roll twice on this table (possibly using the same factors), where the answer to the first question gives you a possible task and then the second roll gives you the DC for it. For example, with the question about being able to get up high enough to see into the village, my first roll tells me whether it's a physical possibility, and my second roll tells me the DC for the roll if I actually try to do it (you can't use the first result for both, since a "Yes.." result would then always mean an easy DC).

Note: I'm not sure who to credit for the basic system I've adapted here. This table with the d6 advantage system is used in MUNE, but that is predated by a post on Tiny Solitary Soldiers, and the table itself is used in Nathan Russell's Freeform/Universal system (though without advantage). I don't know whether that was its first appearance as a d6 table, but the whole concept of "Yes, and... No, but..." has been used in Improv groups for decades.

References and Further Reading

D&D 5e Essentials Rulebook (including Sidekick rules):

https://media.wizards.com/2020/dnd/downloads/dnd_essentials_rulebook.pdf

RPGBOT Guide to Sidekicks: <https://rpgbot.net/dnd5/dungeonmasters/sidekicks/>

The Lone Crusader (via Wayback Machine): <https://web.archive.org/thelonecrusader.com/>

Hero Forge Custom Miniatures: <https://www.heroforge.com/>

Player's Handbook / Dungeon Master's Guide / Xanathar's Guide to Everything / Volo's Guide to Monsters / Lost Mines of Phandelver (in D&D Starter Set) / Dragon of Icespire Peak (in D&D Essentials Kit) / Storm King's Thunder / Curse of Strahd Wizards of the Coast

The Monsters Know What They're Doing Keith Ammann: <https://www.themonstersknow.com/>

Elminster's Guide to Solo Adventuring Oliver Gibson (DMsGuild)

The Solo Adventurer's Toolbox Paul Bimler (DMsGuild)

D&D Solo Adventures Paul Bimler (DMsGuild)

Tome of Adventure Design Matthew J. Finch (Drivethru RPG)

The Lone Crusader: Lost Mines of Phandelver (via Wayback Machine): <https://web.archive.org/thelonecrusader.com/play-it-solo-dungeons-dragons-starter-set-5th-edition-lost-mine-of-phandelver>

Playing Curse of Strahd Solo in 5e saturnine13 r/Solo_Roleplaying

https://www.reddit.com/r/Solo_Roleplaying/comments/cnj49q/playing_curse_of_strahd_solo_in_5e/

How to Run Curse of Strahd Power Score RPG

<http://thecampaign20xx.blogspot.com/2016/05/dungeons-dragons-how-to-run-curse-of.html>

The Extended Immersion Table

First, let me restate that ideally you should never use these tables. You get the best Immersion effects by using your imagination from a d6 roll on the basic Immersion Table – the spark of creativity involved means that you craft the result to fit the context and fully experience it. Having said that, we all sometimes draw a blank and require a bit of help, so that's where the Extended Immersion Table comes in.

Roll a d6 to determine the sense as normal, then roll on the table for that sense. Don't just read the result – feel it, imagine yourself in the scene experiencing it, weave it into the story. If the result is non-specific, then fill in the details. In rare cases, if the immersion roll perfectly clicks with the action, feel free to award yourself advantage or disadvantage on the relevant roll (e.g. Hyper-awareness might give you advantage on an initiative roll, or a whiff of decay might help you with that Perception check to avoid being surprised by the Ghast lurking on the other side of the door).

1: Smell

The Smell table is a simple one. Roll d6 for the row, then d6 for the column. Most of these odours can fit into most situations with a bit of work (e.g. a scent of grass/hay might not feel like it makes a lot of sense underground, but could it be bedding for the prison cells or rat's nests?). If you want to know the strength of the smell, roll a d10 (1 is a barely detectable hint, 10 is overpowering).

Smell d6	d6					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Acid	Candles/burning	Fungus	Moss	Rotten meat	Stone
2	Alcohol	Cooking/food	Grass/hay	Oil	Rust	Sulphur
3	Ammonia	Damp/decay	Incense	Old books/paper	Smoke	Sweat
4	Beeswax	Excrement	Leather	Ozone/salt	Soil	Urine
5	Blood	Fish	Manure	Petrichor/dust	Sour milk	Wet fur
6	Breath	Flowers/blossom	Metal	Resin/Pine	Spice	Wood

2: Sound

There are two Sound tables – one for if you're in a settlement, the other for if you're underground or in the wilderness. Roll a d8 for the row and a d6 for the column. If you want to know the rough distance of the sound, roll a d10 for volume (1 is barely audible, 10 is deafening).

There is still some imaginative work to do after you've made the roll: what's the vendor selling, is the singing angelic or abominable, is that the squeaking of rats or a hinge in need of oil, is the laughter good-natured or manic, is that heartbeat your own or someone else's? However, note that if you're in combat, don't bother making a roll; instead, imagine the sounds of combat – the clash of swords, the thud of hammer on shield or claws scraping across armour, the cracks and pops of spell effects, the clattering of feet and the grunts of pain.

Sound (Village/Town/City) d8	d6					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Banging	Chopping	Giggling	Pounding	Shattering	Talking
2	Barking	Clanking	Grinding	Rattling	Shouting	Vendors
3	Begging	Clucking	Growling	Rumbling	Silence	Wagon
4	Bell(s)	Crash	Hammering	Rustling	Singing	Water flowing
5	Birdsong	Digging	Horses	Sawing	Smashing	Whispers
6	Bubbling	Dripping	Laughter	Scraping	Splashing	Whistling
7	Cawing	Fire	Murmuring	Scratching	Squeaking	Wind blowing
8	Children	Footsteps	Music	Screaming	Squealing	Yelping

Sound (Underground/Wilderness) d8	d6					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Banging	Crunching	Grinding	Murmuring	Shrieking	Tapping
2	Bell(s)	Digging	Growling	Rattling	Sighing	Wailing
3	Boom!	Dragging	Hammering	Rumbling	Silence	Water flowing
4	Breathing	Dripping	Heartbeat	Rustling	Skittering	Whining
5	Bubbling	Echo	Hissing	Scraping	Splashing	Whispers
6	Chanting	Fire	Howling	Scratching	Splintering	Whistling
7	Clanking	Footsteps	Laughter	Screaming	Squeaking	Wind blowing
8	Crash	Giggling	Moaning	Shouting	Talking	Yelping

3: Sight

Things are more complicated for the Sight tables. There are so many things you might see, and they are so dependent on context, that you could fill a whole book with them (indeed, some people have!). Therefore, the table below is rather more abstract. Roll a d20 twice. The first roll tells you the general nature of something seen and the second gives the manner in which you saw it, but you'll need to fill in the details of what the something actually is (though of course you may not see it clearly enough to know). If you have company, instead make a roll for an interesting physical feature of the main enemy or NPC in the room using a d10 and d6 on the Sight (Enemy/NPC) table. If it's an NPC you may instead use the NPC Appearance and Mannerisms tables in the DMG (pp. 89-90).

Sight

d20	You see something...	...how/where
1	Beautiful...	...above you
2	Brightly-coloured...	...almost hidden from view
3	Broken...	...and it worries you
4	Crafted...	...and then it's gone
5	Decorated...	...and you want it
6	Disgusting...	...clearly and vividly
7	Edible...	...conspicuously-placed
8	Forgotten, discarded...	...dusty and faded with age
9	Fragile...	...from the corner of your eye
10	Horrific...	...in the dark
11	Liquid...	...in the distance
12	Natural...	...in the shadows
13	Odd, out-of-place...	...nearby, maybe within reach
14	Reflected...	...on the ground
15	Round...	...right in front of you
16	Shadow...	...strangely-lit
17	Shiny, glinting...	...that cheers you
18	Tiny...	...that saddens you
19	Valuable...	...that stirs a memory
20	Written or carved...	...through a gap

Sight (Enemy/NPC)

d10	d6					
	1 - Eyes	2 - Nose	3 - Ears/Hair	4 - Mouth/Jaw	5 - Face	6 - Body
1	Bright	Bent	Bald	Beard	Ear/nose piercings	Broad-shouldered
2	Close-set	Broad	Ear missing	Big mouth	Fat-cheeked	Flabby
3	Clouded	Button	Large ears	Big teeth	Freckled	Hairy
4	Cold	Flat	Long hair	Chinless	High cheekbones	Lean and wiry
5	Deep-set	Hooked	Plaited hair	Large chin	Pock-marked	Missing arm
6	Hooded	Long	Pointed ears	Missing teeth	Scarred	Muscular
7	Lazy	Missing	Protruding ears	Overbite	Smooth-skinned	Oddly-dressed
8	One missing	Round	Short hair	Slack-jawed	Spotty	Short
9	Shifty	Scarred	Small ears	Stubble	Sweaty	Tall
10	Watery	Thin	Thin hair	Underbite	Tattooed	Thin and bony

4: Skin

To use the Skin table, first roll a d10 to see where the thing is you touch (or touches you). Then roll a d10 and d4 to find the row and column for the texture or sensation that you feel. You'll need to do some work to figure out exactly what it is you touched – or maybe you're better off not knowing... To know which part of your body felt the texture, roll a d6 (1-3: Hand, 4: Arm, 5: Back, 6: Face).

Skin d10	Where	d4			
		1	2	3	4
1	Yourself	Breath/air	Flexible	Lumpy	Smooth
2	Sidekick	Bumpy	Fluffy	Metal	Soft
3	Enemy/NPC	Coarse	Furry	Rough	Solid
4	Enemy/NPC	Cold	Fuzzy	Scratchy	Spongy
5	Environment	Curved	Grainy	Sharp	Squishy
6	Environment	Damp	Gritty	Silky	Sticky
7	Environment	Dense	Hair	Skin	Stone
8	Environment	Engraved	Hard	Slick	Viscous
9	Environment	Fibrous	Leather	Slimy	Warm
10	Environment	Firm	Liquid	Slippery	Wooden

5: Social

To use the Social table, roll a d6 three times (once for each of the first three columns) to find who communicates with whom, and what form the communication takes. If it's in the form of speech, roll another d6 on the Social table for the fourth column, to see what the nature of the speech is (and once you know the nature of it, you should imagine what's actually said). Otherwise, if it's not speech, roll a d6 for row and another for column on the Social (Expression/Gesture) table. Although some of the results may seem counter-intuitive, remember that expressions and gestures can carry much nuance – a smile can be friendly or mocking, a clap might be sarcastic or sincere. If there are no enemies or NPCs in the room, then the communication will be between you and your Sidekick, and it's fine for you or your Sidekick to speak or emote to yourself. If you get a result of Enemy/NPC for both **From** and **To**, that indicates you overhearing or witnessing an interaction between them.

Social

d6	From	To	Communication	Speech
1	You	You	Speech (normal)	Swearing
2	You	You	Speech (whisper)	Question
3	Sidekick	Sidekick	Speech (shout)	Order
4	Sidekick	Sidekick	Expression/gesture	Threat
5	Enemy/NPC	Enemy/NPC	Expression/gesture	Bargain
6	Enemy/NPC	Enemy/NPC	Expression/gesture	Chit-chat

Social (Expression/Gesture)

d6	d6					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Anger	Disgust	High five	Poke	Shake head	Thumbs up
2	Bite lip	Facepalm	Laugh	Raise eyebrows	Shhh!	Tongue out
3	Clap	Fear	Nod	Roar	Shrug	Wait
4	Clenched fist	Fistbump	Obscene	Roll eyes	Smile	Wave
5	Contempt	Get over here	Pensive	Sad	Surprise	Whistle
6	Cutthroat	Hand on heart	Point	Scowl	Thoughtful	Wink

6: Sense

The Sense table is a mixed bag of emotions, psychological states and memories. Roll a d6 for the row and a d4 for the column. Try to link the result to the environment and/or the action that's taking place. With memories in particular, you should work out the specifics of what it is in the location or situation that puts you in mind of something in your past.

Sense d6	d4			
	1	2	3	4 (Memory from...)
1	Anger	Dizziness/vertigo	Heart racing/panic	Childhood
2	Being watched	Elation	Horror	5 years ago
3	Calm	Extreme heat/cold	Hyperawareness	Last year
4	Claustrophobia	Fear	Losing balance	Last week
5	Confusion/Anxiety	Gloom	Lucidity	Sidekick
6	Déjà vu	Goosebumps	Oppression	Song/joke

AI Combat Tactics Tables

For this section I took the monster tactics described in the *Monster Manual*, *Volo's Guide to Monsters* and *The Monsters Know What They're Doing*, and simplified them as much as I could. I wanted to produce a system that wasn't much more complicated than the monster AI from the D&D Adventure System board games. My years of programming the AI for *Tomb Raider* also helped a bit.

If you have the time and access to the TMKWTD website (or, even better, a physical copy of the book) then I recommend you use that as the basis for your enemy's behaviour – you will find much more detailed and specific information than I can possibly give in these tables. It's also possible to use the MM or VGM for guidance as to how monsters behave, or the adventure itself may give detailed behaviour for the combat (though this is unusual). However, in the absence of any of these alternatives, or if you just want a quick and easy method to provide a simple 'AI'-controlled opponent, use the relevant table below (all terms and abbreviations are explained on pg. 39).

Some general things to consider:

- Not all encounters lead to combat. As a rule of thumb, good creatures tend to be friendly, neutral are indifferent, evil are hostile. Chaotic and lawful creatures are mutually hostile.
- Some behaviours indicate what specific attack the creature chooses. If this is not shown, then the order of preference is: an ability with recharge (like a breath weapon), a spell or ability, multiattack, normal melee/ranged attack. If that still leaves a choice, then generally a creature will use the available attack that does the greatest amount of damage. However, if a creature has an ability that gives it an advantage or confers disadvantage on the opponent, it will prefer to use that feature, and if a creature has an ability/attack that requires the target to make a saving throw, it will prefer that to a straight attack.

There are 14 monster types in 5e. To keep this combat guide within a few pages, I've had to group some of these together, and *really* simplify things. It's impossible to capture the complexity and nuances of several hundred different monsters in such a small space, but I hope at least to capture something of the behaviour that typifies that monster type, so you can avoid the trap of running every combat along the lines of "monster runs towards you and attacks until it's dead".

I've tried to group similar-behaving monsters together. For Humanoids, use the general Enemy Behaviour table on pg. 38 or the Goblinoid/Mages tables below:

- Humanoid
- Beasts and Monstrosities
- Undead, Constructs and Elementals
- Giants (including Ogres and Trolls)
- Fey and Aberrations
- Celestials and Fiends
- Oozes and Plants
- Dragons

Reminder, the table is a simple if-then-else 'sieve', which means that the most important/niche rules go first (survival is the most important thing for most creatures) with default/general rules lower down. You only do the behaviour listed for the *first* trigger that is true as you go down the list, not all of them. If a cell says n/a, or none of the suggested behaviours are applicable/available (e.g. the creature has no ranged attack), then ignore this trigger and carry on down the list.

Humanoid (Goblinoid)

Trigger	Goblin	Kobold	Orc	Gnoll	Hobgoblin	Bugbear
If low hp	Disengage, Dash, Move away	Dash, Move away	Disengage/ Dash, Move away	Dash, Move away	Disengage/ Dash, Move away	Dash, Move away
If within melee ^{1,2}	Melee, Disengage, Move to optimal	Move ⁴ to swarm, Melee	Move, Move (Aggressive), Melee	Move to nearest, Melee (Rampage)	Move ^{3,4} to swarm, Melee (Rampage)	Move to nearest, Melee (Surprise)
If within ranged+	Ranged+, Move to optimal, Hide	Move to optimal/Hide, Ranged	n/a	n/a (unless PCs fleeing)	Move to optimal ³ /Hide, Ranged	n/a (unless PCs fleeing)
Otherwise	Move to cover, Hide, Ready Ranged	Dash, Move towards	Move, Move (Aggressive), Dash towards	Dash, Move towards	Dash, Move towards	Hide/Move to cover, Ready Attack

¹**Goblins:** only do this if they are already within Melee range, otherwise ignore this trigger.

²**Kobolds:** only do this if two or more can reach the same target, otherwise ignore this trigger.

³**Hobgoblins:** will always attack Elves in preference to any other target

⁴**Swarm:** when attacking, always choose targets so that at least two creatures are on a PC – do not engage a PC if you would end up being the only creature attacking that PC

Humanoid (Mages and other Spellcasters)

Trigger ¹	Mage	Archmage	Other Spellcasters
If low hp or sixth+ round	<i>Misty Step</i> , then Move away	<i>Teleport</i> away	' <i>Escape</i> ' spell, then Move away
On first round	<i>Greater Invisibility</i> , Move to Optimal	<i>Time Stop</i> ² , Move to Optimal	Highest-level ' <i>Defense/Buff</i> ' spell, Move to Optimal
If within melee range	<i>Misty Step</i> , <i>Fire Bolt</i> , Move to Optimal	<i>Misty Step</i> , <i>Fire Bolt</i> , Move to Optimal	<i>Misty Step</i> , <i>Fire Bolt</i> , Move to Optimal
If within ranged+	Move to Optimal, <i>Cone of Cold</i> / <i>Fireball</i> / <i>Ice Storm</i>	Move to Optimal, <i>Cone of Cold</i> / <i>Banishment</i> / <i>Lightning Bolt</i>	Move to Optimal, Highest-level <i>Damage</i> / <i>'De-buff'</i> spell
Otherwise (before combat?)	<i>Mage Armor</i>	<i>Mirror Image</i> (<i>Mage Armour</i> / <i>Stone Skin</i> / <i>Mind Blank</i> pre-cast)	' <i>Defense/Buff</i> ' spell with at least 1-min duration

¹**Reactions:** always use a reaction to cast *Shield* (against attacks that hit but are less than 5 greater than the mage's current AC) or *Counterspell* (against a spell – not a cantrip – that would damage the mage or prevent its escape. An Archmage will cast this at higher level if necessary to ensure success)

²**Time Stop:** this will give the Archmage 1d4+1 turns in a row. The first turn will be used to cast *Globe of Invulnerability* if (and only if) the PC is a spellcaster. The last turn will be used for *Cone of Cold*. If there are any extra turns left the Archmage will cast *Fire Shield* (to resist Fire unless the PCs have used Cold damage attacks), and *Mirror Image* if not already active. During these turns they will also move to the optimal position to cast *Cone of Cold*.

Beasts and Monstrosities

Trigger	Beast ¹	Monstrosity
If low hp	Dash, then Move away	Dash, then Move away
If within melee+	Move to Nearest, Multiattack/Melee	Move to Nearest, Charged/Multiattack/Melee
If within ranged+	n/a	Move to Optimal, Charged/Spell/Ranged
Otherwise	If predator: Dash, Move towards; otherwise Hide/Ready Attack	Dash, Move towards

¹**Beasts:** Beasts will use Charge/Pounce when moving into melee, if they have such an ability. Beasts with Pack Tactics, when attacking, will always choose targets so that at least two creatures are on a PC – do not engage a PC if you would end up being the only creature attacking that PC.

Undead, Constructs and Elementals¹

Trigger	Incorporeal Undead ²	Corporeal Undead	Vampire, Lich, Mummy Lord ³	Construct, Elemental ⁴	Genie, Mephit
If low hp	n/a	n/a	Flee, using spells and abilities	n/a	Disengage, Move (flying, up/away)
If within melee+	Move to Nearest, Charged/Melee	Move to Nearest, Charged/Melee	Move to Vulnerable, Spell/Ability	Move to Nearest, Charged/Melee	Move to Nearest, Charged/Melee
If within ranged+	Move toward Nearest, Charged/Ranged	Move to Optimal, Charged/Ranged	Move to Optimal, Spell/Ability	Move toward Nearest, Charged/Ranged	Move toward Nearest, Charged/Ranged
Otherwise	Hide/Ready Attack	Dash, Move towards	Preparatory Spell/Ability	Dash, Move towards	Dash, Move towards (fly)

¹**Undead, Constructs, Genies, Elementals:** may behave differently if specified by orders/binding

²**Incorporeal Form:** incorporeal undead always use their incorporeal/amorphous form while moving

³**High-Level Undead:** vulnerable in this case means a target that is already charmed/paralysed or has the lowest Wisdom saving throw of possible targets. Preparatory spell ability means *Children of the Night*, *Globe of Invulnerability* or *Insect Plague*. Don't forget Lair/Legendary Actions.

⁴**Elemental Form:** Elementals always use their elemental form while moving

Giants

Trigger	Hill ¹	Stone	Frost	Fire	Cloud	Storm
If low hp	Dash, Move away	Disengage/ Dash, Move away	n/a	Disengage/ Dash, Move away	<i>Misty Step</i> , Dash, Move away	Surrender, Negotiate
If within melee+	Melee+ (Multiattack)	Melee+ (Multiattack)	Melee+ vs. Strongest (Multiattack)	Melee+ vs. Weakest (Multiattack)	Melee+ ² vs. Weakest (Multiattack)	Charged/Melee+ (Multiattack)
If within ranged+	Ranged+ (Rock), Move towards	Ranged+ (Rock)	Ranged+ (Rock), Move towards	Ranged+ (Rock), Move towards	Negotiate/ Ranged+ (Rock)	Negotiate/ Charged/ Ranged+(Rock)
Otherwise	Dash, Move towards	Hide/Ready Ranged	Dash, Move towards	Dash, Move towards	Negotiate/ Wait	Negotiate/ Charged

¹**Ogres** (use Javelin instead of Rock) and **Trolls** (skip the Ranged trigger) also use this column

²**Misty Step** (to *behind* target) if that would bring target into Melee+ range

Fey and Aberrations

Trigger	Hag ²	Other Evil Fey	Good/Neutral Fey	Beholder ⁵	Slaad	Mind Flayer
If low hp	Dash, Move away ¹	Dash, Move away ^{1,3}	Dash, Move away ¹	Disengage/ Dash, Move (fly up, away)	Dash, Move away	Plane Shift/Dash, Move away ³
If within melee+	Melee+, Move to optimal ¹	Move toward Nearest ⁴ , Melee	Move to optimal ¹ , Ranged	Move to optimal, Ranged	Melee+ (Multiattack)	Move, Mind Blast/Extract Brain/Tentacle
If within ranged+	Move to optimal ¹ /Hide, Ranged	Move toward Nearest, Ranged	Move to optimal ¹ /Hide, Ranged	Move to optimal, Ranged	Move toward Nearest, Ranged	Move to optimal, Mind Blast
Otherwise	Regroup, Hide ¹ /Ready Ranged	Dash, Move towards	Hide ¹ /Move to cover, Ready Attack	Hide/Move to cover, Ready Ranged	Hide/Move to cover, Shapechange	Move, Send Minions/ Ready Ranged

¹**Fey Abilities and Spells:** Many Fey have abilities (such as *Invisibility* or *Teleportation*) that they will use to help them move away (instead of Disengaging), move to attack with advantage, or hide in preparation to ambush. They will always use these abilities if available, and will use damaging/status spells (or spell-like abilities) if they have them in preference to Melee or Ranged attacks

²**Hag Covens:** Hags in Covens (a group of 3 Hags) are much more powerful than lone hags. They have access to higher level spells (*Eyebite*, *Phantasmal Killer*, *Lightning Bolt*) which they will use aggressively. They will try to stay within 30ft of each other at all times to maintain this shared spellcasting

³**Low hp:** ignore low hp trigger unless the fight is clearly lost

⁴**Redcaps:** use *Ironbound Pursuit* to charge into Melee

⁵**Beholders:** if in lair, ignore low hp trigger and take a Lair Action on initiative count 20 each turn – roll a d3 to choose which Lair Action it takes (reroll if this is the same one it took last turn). Use an *Eye Ray* Legendary Action at the end of each character's turn

Celestials and Fiends

Trigger	Celestial	Demon	Devil & Other Fiend	Yugoloth	Rakshasa
If low hp	Disengage (using spells/abilities if available), Move (flying, up/away)	n/a	Dash, Move (fly, up) away ¹	n/a	Plane Shift/Invisibility, Move away
If within melee+	Charge/Move to Nearest ¹ , Charged/Melee	Move to Nearest, Charged/Melee	Move to Nearest, Melee	Move to Nearest, Charged/Multiattack	If within 5', Multiattack, otherwise ignore trigger
If within ranged+	Move (fly) to optimal ¹ , Charged/Ranged	Move toward Nearest, Charged/Ranged	Move to optimal, Ranged	Move to optimal, Darkness/Ranged	Move to optimal, Dominate/Charm/Suggestion
Otherwise	Move (fly) towards, use supporting abilities on self or allies	Use Ability ² /Ready Attack, Move towards Nearest	Dash, Move towards	Teleport, Move towards	Invisibility/Major Image, Move towards

¹**Celestials:** use defensive spells and abilities before offensive ones. Will always attack the most evil/chaotic target first. Many Celestials have Legendary Actions, which they will use at the end of each character's turn, and Legendary Resistance

²**Demons:** many demons have Invisibility, Incorporeal/Mist form or similar, which they will use at the start of the encounter (or, more likely, be in already before the encounter begins)

Oozes and Plants

Trigger	Ooze	Plant
If low hp ¹	Dash, then Move away ²	n/a
If within ranged+	n/a	(Needle/Vine Blights only) Move to optimal, then Ranged
If within melee+ ³	Move to nearest, then Engulf/Pseudopod	Move to nearest, then Charged/Multiattack/Melee
Otherwise ⁴	Hide/Ready Engulf/Pseudopod	Hide/Ready Multiattack/Melee

¹**Split:** low hp may be different for Oozes because they might split if hit with lightning or slashing damage – each split Ooze checks for low hp based on the starting hp of that new Ooze rather than that of the original

²**Amorphous:** all Oozes except the Gelatinous Cube have this ability – they can effectively escape through any wall in a typical cave/dungeon environment

³**Engulf:** the Gelatinous Cube moves again during an Engulf attack, so its Melee+ range is 30ft

⁴**Hidden:** when stationary, most Plants and Oozes are either perfectly disguised by *False Appearance* (the PCs don't even get the chance to make a Perception Check), *Transparent* (Gelatinous Cube), or hiding on the ceiling (Black Pudding, Ochre Jelly), requiring a successful Perception test to notice even if the enemy hasn't *hidden*

Dragons

Trigger	Dragon
If low hp	Disengage/Dash, then Move (flying, up/away)
If breath ready and within ranged+	Move to optimal (see <i>Breath Weapon</i> below), then Breath attack
If within melee+	Move to nearest, then Multiattack
Otherwise	Move towards nearest (flying), then Ready Breath/Multiattack

Lair actions: if the dragon is in its lair it will take a Lair action on initiative count 20 each turn. For Chromatic dragons roll a d3 to choose which Lair action it takes (reroll if this is the same one it took last turn). For Metallic dragons roll a d2

Breath Weapon: the optimal position for using a breath weapon is where the dragon is able to get as many enemies as possible with the breath weapon, while being as far away as possible (unless this movement would cause the dragon to suffer an opportunity attack, in which case it moves to the best position for the attack without leaving the enemy's reach). Remember to roll for recharge at the start of the dragon's turn (before choosing their action for the turn) if they've previously used their breath weapon

Ancient/Adult dragons:

- **Frightful Presence:** use on all enemies within range at the start of a Multiattack
- **Legendary Actions:** if within 10' of an enemy, the dragon uses Wing Attack at the end of the first character's turn, and Tail Attack at the end of the other character's turn
- **Legendary Resistance:** always use on a failed save until all 3 uses are gone

A Guide to DMing Yourself through Well-Known Adventures

First, a few disclaimers:

- In the adventures that follow, by trying to steer you round the *worst* of the spoilers I will have to inevitably have to spoil *some* things. If I could spend a year on each adventure and could devote a whole booklet to it, then it might be possible to turn it into some sort of spoiler-free, CYOA-style solo gamebook. However, all I have space for here is a few pointers about the best way to tackle the adventure.
- I'm showing you *one* possible route through the adventure. There may be other, better ways, but this will give you at least a guide if you want one (it is, of course, possible to just play it without looking at my notes at all)
- When I started to write these notes I realised that four pages wasn't enough to give a proper guide to *one* adventure, never mind several. So, it might be better to consider these a set of high-level pointers rather than actual guides.

I have chosen adventures to talk about here based on ones I am familiar with and which are widely available. *DM Yourself* works easiest with linear and/or quest based adventures like *Lost Mines of Phandelver* or *Dragon of Icespire Peak*. Big, open, sandbox campaigns like *Storm King's Thunder* or *Curse of Strahd* are more of a challenge, but I've given some pointers on how to approach them.

Lost Mines of Phandalin

You get two choices for this – the guidance below, or the *Lone Crusader* guide via Wayback Engine.

Before its demise a couple of years ago, the *Lone Crusader* was my favourite resource for solo 5e. One of the biggest and best features on the site was the curated solo journey through *Lost Mines of Phandalin*. The link for this is in the references, and you can use the guide to navigate your way through the adventure while using the *DM Yourself* rules for actually playing it.

Alternatively, use the guidance here. Start at the beginning, skip *Background* and *Overview* (you can come back and read the first two paragraphs of *Background* later once you've talked to Sildar).

1. **Goblin Arrows.** The start has minor spoilers, but the title of the chapter and the section give it away anyway, so don't worry about them. Once you get to *Goblin Trail* watch out for DC markers and make a Binding Decision as soon as you see the bit about marching order. Follow usual *DM Yourself* rules for the rest of this chapter. Once you get to location 8, read the *Developments* after you've made your Binding Decision but before you play out the encounter.
2. **Phandalin.** Again, a few minor spoilers, but best to read everything up until *Rumours* (check the character names listed here, and only read the rumour if/when you talk to the indicated character), otherwise use the *DM Yourself* Towns and NPC rules (pg. 41) to explore the town, and only read the section on a location if/when you visit it. The quests *Halia's Job Offer* and *Finding Iarno* both have (short-term, relatively minor) spoilers near the end – both can be safely returned to once you've completed the *Redbrand Hideout* (which you can run using normal *DM Yourself* rules – read the Intro and *General Features*, but skip the spoilers in the *Doors* section).
3. **The Spider's Web.** The first page of this is safe to read. Only read the Goblin/Hobgoblin entries *after* you've encountered/defeated them. You'll only visit locations in this chapter if you have a quest to go there. With the exception of *Ruins of Thundertree*, the intro section to each of these is safe to read, and you can deal with each of these locations just by making sure you're making Binding Decisions before you read the boxed location descriptions. There is a fairly minor, unavoidable spoiler in *The King's Quarters in Cragmaw Castle*. *Ruins of Thundertree* is more of a problem – skip the second half of the second paragraph of the intro. Treat the map as a dungeon rather than a safe village (i.e. use the fog-of-war rules). Also, be aware that many people consider that one of the encounters in this location is overpowered, so my advice would be to make sure you're at least level 5 and/or be prepared to run away (it *can* be done, though!).
4. **Wave Echo Cave.** You should be at least level 5. The introduction to this chapter is full of spoilers, BUT they help to make sense of the story. My advice is to read the first two paragraphs (assuming you've rescued Gundren, he will know this stuff), skip the third (leave it until the adventure's over), and read the last. You can safely read everything else on this first page. There are several locations in Wave Echo Cave where things are not as they first appear, where there are hidden things or where there may be more than one way to approach an encounter. Because of this, it is vitally important that you make Binding Decisions before and after you read each boxed location description (it's always important, but even more so here!). Also, because this is quite a large mine/cave network, you can probably allow yourself a couple of short rests (use the time logging rules if you don't find a safe location indicated in the adventure). Once you reach the final battle, only read the first paragraph of the *Developments* section on pg. 50 after 3 rounds of combat have passed. Don't read the second paragraph until you're back in Phandalin and have committed to your course of action. Then read the *Conclusion*.

Dragon of Icespire Peak

Read everything until you get to page 7, skip *Adventure Background* then carry on reading *Welcome to Phandalin*. Use the *DM Yourself* Towns and NPC rules (pg. 41) to explore the town, and only read the section on a location in *Exploring Phandalin* if/when you visit it. Don't look at the *Phandalin Tales* table unless you're instructed to make a roll. When you find the Job Board you can read the section on *Phandalin Quests* and the *Starting Quests*. Don't read the *Follow-Up Quests* until they're on the board (once you've completed two starting quests). Read the section on *Leveling Up* (remember that where it says Level 3, that means Level 4 for *DM Yourself* PCs). Unfortunately there is really no option but to read *Where's the White Dragon*, as you need to roll on the table whenever you arrive at or prepare to leave an adventure location, but don't read the stat block until you actually fight it. Read *Ending the Adventure* (pg. 48) when you deal with the dragon, run out of quests, or both.

This is a quest-based campaign, and in general that makes it well-suited to solo play. Some general hints on playing through the quests:

- Given that you have to use DM's map on pg. 5 to look up locations for quests, there's no way of avoiding looking at it. However, you can *only* go to a named location if you've been given a quest to go there, or if its location is referenced directly by someone or something.
- It is safe to read the introductory paragraph stating what level the quest is intended for— as a solo PC you should be one level higher than the stated level. If you accidentally embark on a quest for which you should be higher level, feel free to change your mind. As a non-solo DM you wouldn't let your party embark on a quest that was much too hard for them, so apply the same rules here.
- Some quests feature a number enemies “for each party member” – you count as a party of three.
- Skip the *Location Overview*, and only read it after you've completed the quest.
- Read the *Quest Goals* section, and the section's *Features* box (these may have minor spoilers).
- Read the *Travel to...* and *Arrival* sections (making a Binding Decision before boxed location text).
- Most of the actual locations in *Dragon of Icespire Peak* don't have a location boxed text, so you'll just have to do your best to imagine the location using the text that is there, the map, and Immersion Rolls. Despite the lack of boxed text, make a Binding Decision before you read room descriptions and another before you read the **Treasure** paragraph if the location has one. The presence of treasure is telegraphed and unavoidable in these descriptions, and often the hiding place is very specific. In such cases you should only find the treasure if you've made a decision to search in the correct place – i.e. a generic “search the room for treasure” will not find it.

There are too many quests to give detailed instructions for each one here. A few specific pointers:

- **Circle of Thunder:** *Cave Descriptions* looks like *Features*, but don't read unless you go in the caves
- **Gnomengarde:** skip *Mystery Monster* until instructed to read it or you've talked to King Korboz
- **Icespire Hold:** if you haven't located *Icespire Hold* by other means by the time you've reached level 7, read the *Finding Icespire Hold* section on pg. 30 and choose one of the methods there. In *Arrival*, don't read beyond the boxed text. Return to it once you've made noise loud enough to be heard outside (e.g. a *Thunderwave* spell or combat in areas not sealed from the outside by doors)
- **Logger's Camp:** read the *Preparations* section before setting out from Phandalin
- **Mountain's Toe Gold Mine:** no way to avoid the spoilers for the 'secret' in this one
- **Shrine of Savras:** it's very hard for a party without Darkvision to tackle this quest. Add a few trees and boulders in the field offering enough cover to get within long range during daylight hours

Storm King's Thunder

I'm currently running the SKT campaign for my family and it's difficult to run even as a normal D&D campaign. This is partly because it's half campaign setting, half adventure, partly the organisation and inter-connectedness of the information, and partly its sheer volume. All this is even worse solo.

Don't read the *Introduction*, but do flick through it to familiarise yourself with where information is. Read *Character Advancement* and *Deadly Encounters* on pg. 16. Look at the top of the *Adventure Flowchart* on the next page, and come back to refer to it as you move on through the story.

Remember you should be one level higher than the expected levels here. Read the *Treasure* page.

Chapter 1 is relatively straightforward. Refer to the *Character Advancement* box on pg. 36 to see when you should level up. You'll start the chapter at Level 2 and should be Level 6 by the end. When you get to *Morak's Quest*, you'll need to choose one of the three Quests. Roll a d3 or choose Triboar.

Chapter 2 Read the start of the chapter and the section on Special NPCs. Spend a day or two exploring your chosen settlement using the *DM Yourself* rules on pg. 41. Get to know at least three of the Special NPCs. When the attack happens, you will control these as well as your PC and Sidekick. They will also be a source of Quests to propel the adventure onwards afterwards. It's really important to remember that, when the attack comes, it's the whole settlement that's fighting the attackers not just you and the NPCs. So conduct *your* fight against just *some* of the listed enemies.

Chapter 3 is a bit of a mess. My advice is to do the quests you picked up in Chapter 2, but if you pass interesting locations on the map (pp. 74-75), you can choose to look them up in Chapter 3 (they are listed alphabetically) and play through any suggested encounter. Once you've completed at least three quests/encounters, roll a d4 when you get to the climax of each one after that. On a roll of 1, *Harshnag* shows up (read pp. 118-119) to help out and also tells the PC about *The Ordning* (pg. 8).

Chapter 4 Skip the opening couple of paragraphs. All is relatively straightforward until you get to the Oracle. After this it can be difficult to work out what the sequence is (even when not playing solo!) – my advice is to read the *Troubleshooting* section (pg. 136) whenever you're preparing to exit the Temple. The first time you do this stop when you get to "As the characters prepare to leave the temple for the second time" and go to pg. 132. The second time read the rest of this section, then the rest of the page finishing with the section on *Character Advancement*.

Chapter 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 You will probably only play one of these. Whichever one you choose, read from the start of the chapter until you get to the first location description, and also read the *General Features* box. There will inevitably be spoilers but you need to know this information in order to run the chapter properly. When you've finished, read *Character Advancement*.

Chapter 10, 11, 12 There is a lot hidden information and intrigue from now on, and I cannot find a way to play through it without major spoilers in the space available here (not helped by the fact that the big bad is in disguise but hasn't even bothered to change her name). So I recommend biting the bullet and reading these Chapters from the start, otherwise I think it will be impossible to make sense of things. Make sure you level up as you go through these chapters. In **Chapter 11** Log time once you've freed your target. If you're still on board the *Morkoth* an hour later, read the section at the end of pg. 223. **Chapter 12** is a huge battle. Make sure you have Hekaton (or Serissa) and the four Storm Giant bodyguards with you. You've effectively got a party of seven characters now (or eight if Harshnag is still alive and you bring him back for this fight). I would definitely advise leaving *Iymrith's Trove* until after it's all over...things are complicated enough as it is. Good luck!

Curse of Strahd

Disclaimer: I haven't actually run *Curse of Strahd* (CoS). I am currently playing it with Louise DMing. I didn't want to spoil the adventure by reading it, so the advice given here is a combination of three sources tailored to the *DM Yourself* system: Louise's ideas from running Strahd, Power Score RPG's (non-solo) *How to Run Curse of Strahd*, and an amazing reddit post *Playing Curse of Strahd Solo in 5e* (both of these are well worth reading in full – links in the references).

The general opinion seems to be that you can't really play CoS without reading the whole thing first. It is a sandbox adventure that is so intertwined, probabilistic and non-linear that it's difficult if not impossible to guide a PC through it without knowing a huge amount of background information yourself.

However, the good news is that because of the way Strahd is intended to be played, reading it all the way through still leaves lots of room for surprises. What happens next is often guided by the way the cards fall in Tarokka readings. The *Playing Curse of Strahd Solo in 5e* reddit post has an excellent suggestion to control Strahd using a "Strahd is Bored" table (which is reproduced in the comments section of the post) – every time you roll a 1 on the d20, add a point to a "Strahd Counter". When the counter hits 10, roll on the table. This means that the Big Bad Evil Guy intervenes in strange and unpredictable ways. Finally, because CoS is so big, even though you've read it through to get the overall picture, you won't remember details when it comes to encounters or locations.

You can also add flavour to your *DM Yourself* experience of CoS by using the Tarokka deck as a replacement for or supplement to the *Minimal DC Oracle* system and/or by using it as inspiration for the details of your 'Sense' if you roll a 6 on the *Immersion Table*.

I advise that you play the optional Death House scenario first to take your PC and Sidekick from Level 2 to Level 4. This is a reasonably 'normal', linear location and will help to ease you into the adventure before all the craziness kicks off. It's worth re-reading *Character Levels* on pg. 6 of CoS for advice on when to level up and also on what level each area is suitable for, so you don't accidentally wander into somewhere you're completely unprepared for.

Finally, if you really want to try and play CoS without reading it through first, you could follow the detailed advice given in Power Score RPG's (non-solo) *How to Run Curse of Strahd*. This takes you step-by-step through starting up the campaign, and suggests one linear route to play through it. With some careful work, you could possibly use this to guide your solo playing of CoS, looking up sections in the adventure as and when suggested by the playthrough. You will certainly see some short-term spoilers in Power Score's guide and you will miss some of the background story, but this is the best route I can suggest if you don't want to read the entire thing before you play. You still need to read some of the early sections of the book to understand some necessary game mechanisms and to get a feel for the Strahd's character; at a minimum, I'd suggest you read the *Introduction* (skip *Story Overview* and *Adventure Structure*), *Marks of Horror, Chapter 1* and the first few pages of *Chapter 2*.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Gary Noble for the illustrations and that amazing cover/frontispiece, Louise Maskill for proof-reading and Caitlin Scutt for huge amounts of research for the AI Combat Tactics tables. Thank you Louise, Molly, Owen and Caitlin for your emotional support and putting up with all this during lockdown, and finally, special thanks to all 536 Kickstarter backers for your patience and your help in bringing the project to life.

DM Yourself Solo Character Sheet Add-On

PC NAME	Hero's Luck	Hindsight	Improved Resistance	Plot Armour							
	3/DAY	3/DAY	PROFICIENCY/2 (EASY MODE)	Remaining 5	Used? X						
Time-consuming Behaviours			Other Behaviours								
<input type="checkbox"/> Listen at closed doors <input type="checkbox"/> Search a room for secret doors after it is cleared <input type="checkbox"/> Search a room for treasure after it is cleared <input type="checkbox"/> Loot the bodies of my enemies <input type="checkbox"/> Re-search dead-ends for secret doors <input type="checkbox"/> Search for traps before entering a room or corridor <input type="checkbox"/> Use stealth when entering a room <input type="checkbox"/> Take anything I can carry that looks like it might be valuable/magical <input type="checkbox"/> Search chests for traps, and only open them once the trap (if any) is disabled <input type="checkbox"/> Explore every corridor/room that I find		 is the weapon I have equipped by default goes first in the marching order (in single file) goes on the right (when walking abreast) usually speaks for the party in social encounters is our default approach in social encounters is used for lighting when it's dark								
			Your Personal Behaviours								
			<input type="checkbox"/>								
			<input type="checkbox"/>								
			<input type="checkbox"/>								
			<input type="checkbox"/>								
			<input type="checkbox"/>								
			<input type="checkbox"/>								
			<input type="checkbox"/>								
			<input type="checkbox"/>								
SIDEKICK NAME			STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA	Class	Race	Level
AC	HP	Speed	PP	Saves		Role, Racial Traits, Languages, etc.					
Action/Attack						Action/Attack					
NAME		TO HIT		DAMAGE		NAME		TO HIT		DAMAGE	
Action/Attack						Action/Attack					
NAME		TO HIT		DAMAGE		NAME		TO HIT		DAMAGE	
Features/Spells											
Equipment/Magical Items/Treasure/Gold											

