

# DM YOURSELF



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## Introduction

Welcome to *DM Yourself* – a guide for how to play existing Fifth Edition (5e) or other fantasy RPG adventures/campaigns 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 5e, 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 GM and I miss the experience of actually playing – so out of frustration (and a desire to make some progress on the big pile of 5e adventures I own) I started to explore options for playing solo.

## Why DM Yourself?

Currently there are two main ways of playing 5e, or other fantasy RPG systems solo:

- 1) Choose-your-own-adventure style modules, written specifically for the solo player. In my opinion, 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 GM emulators such as Mythic and Dungeon/Encounter/Quest generators, as in the *5e DMG* 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 GM 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 5e adventures on your own. Acting as both Games Master and Player can seem weird at first – a bit like sending yourself a Direct Message on social media – but I'll show you how to embrace this strange-but-rewarding dual-role and fearlessly *DM Yourself*.

## Why use 5e?

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

The longer answer is that 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 GM 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 easier than it would be in Old School Revival (OSR) systems, where the GM 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, almost all of the material in *DM Yourself* can 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 can be relatively easily adapted. More detailed advice on how to use *DM Yourself* with other systems can be found in the Appendix.

## 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 GM 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 5e – but they have help when they need it.

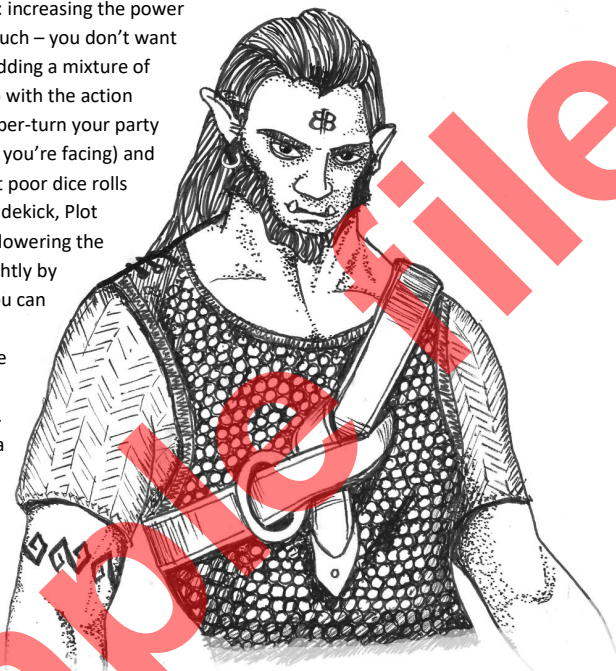
## Which Adventures does this work with?

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