

# The Dungeon Master's Dashboard

Interview data with domain experts (Dungeon Masters, or DMs)

## Questions:

Intro: we want to know more about what DMs use during and before their campaigns. We are focusing on DnD specifically.

### General

- Do you do RPG on paper or do you use a web tool? What tools?
- (END) Can you share your notes?
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### Monster shopping

-How do you choose a monster for an encounter? What factors do you take into consideration when choosing?

### Character relationship

-Do you keep track of the relationship between characters? What aspects of the relationship do you care about? How do you keep track of them? Do you quantify it in any way?

### Party tracker

- How do you keep track of information about individual party members?
- Which aspects do you want to know about or refer to the most?
- Which sections of the character sheet do you use most frequently, as a DM? Do you track anything else not on the sheet?

Now I want to ask you about how do you use this information

- When planning the next challenge (enemy encounter, puzzle, etc) for you players, do you consider their character information individually or as a group (e.g. strength, weaknesses, equipment) ? Do you find yourself comparing characters? How do you do any of the above?

### Dice Tracker

- Which numbers are the most important for you to know if a set of dice is lucky? Is it just 1 and 20, or do you take other numbers into consideration?
- When do you decide to not use a set of dice again? Is it low rolls, is it rolls of 1 etc.

## Interviews (9 DMs)

### Interview 1

DMed only a couple of times on paper, did not know the tools well. After the pandemic they would DM online using roll20 or rRPG if they got the chance.

They consider ambiance, player's level and tastes. Uses the d&d books, internet in general, youtube campaigns with the same ambiance and the opinion of more experienced DMs as inspiration.

Yes, they use paper annotations and have a table to use during the game; if it is very important information they write it immediately. It is important to know that to make the game and role play more immersive and interesting for both the players and the DM, the relationship information can be important in the future and can influence how an NPC is going to act. They note things like parent/children or trainer/trainee relations and quantify it in terms of “loves x neutral x hates”.

For items and skills they leave it up to the player to keep track. When an information is very important they write it separately in private using paper, notes, tables and organize by character to not get lost. “I don’t know”. Skills, features, saving throws. Yes, for important stuff the player said or things that happened they ask the players to write it on the sheet and they write it down too to guarantee. They lean more towards a group focused decision, but go to an individual one if it is very important to the story. The game is played in a group so they want to highlight the group. If one person/character is having too much of the spotlight they try to find something to highlight the others. Yes, they compare strengths to balance fights.

They are not dice superstitious.

## Interview 2

They use dice and maps online because they don’t have physical resources such as miniatures, but use paper character sheets whenever it is possible. With the pandemic most games became online, but they run in person games when possible. Tools: roll20, rRPG firecast (not that good) and some websites to calculate encounters, recall spells and item prices.

Chooses according to the story, tries to make it more consistent with the scenario (no polar bears in the desert) and challenge level. They go by general knowledge, monsters they have seen in series, books, etc. Thinks of the monster first and then searches if there is a status for it in d&d.

Yes, at least a small note if they do not have time to detail it. They keep track specially for when an NPC reappears they remember that and keep verisimilitude. Example: “X had a good encounter with Y” or even writes more details to keep focus of the NPC’s thoughts. The levels of the relationships are the most important: good or bad and how good and how bad. They put it as a scale, in the first encounter the characters are at 0 and after that on following interactions can increase positively or negatively. They do not classify the relationship, as a rivalry can be friendly or bad and it makes no difference whether the positivity comes from a friendship or a debt/promise.

Usually uses the DM notes in the character sheet in roll20 or paper. They keep track of the relationship with other characters, subjective aspects and impressions on actions. It can be the impression on a city level, also the reaction may change by culture. Annotates the story of the character, directions such as what the PC has done so far and where that is leading them; does not care much about technical aspects. Focuses on ideals, flaws, a little bit on the alignment and mainly the background. No. As a group because it is easier to adapt from the group to individually rather than the opposite. Uses encounter calculators for the challenge level of the group and thinks about the strengths and weakness of the characters classes, thinks about what can be explored from the PCs backgrounds, magical items. Yes, primarily when they think about changing the focus of the narrative. When they have been doing too much combat

they try to change to political themes, for example. That is why they keep an eye on the background, to stimulate them to communicate and unite the characters.

They do not abandon dice when they are rolling bad, even because they do not have a lot of them. But when they roll too close to 10 (3 up or down) they get annoyed and think it is bad luck, most challenges are above that.

### Interview 3

Pre-pandemic in paper and now online using roll20 and [world anvil](#).

Either 1 - browses the Monsters Guide, finds a cool one that is going to be the thematic axis and selects one or two more to assist in the same thematic axis (example: kobolds accompanied by dragons or goblins with worgs) or 2 - creates new monsters.

Yes, recently the created a mechanic of social function of a PC with 20 alternatives that have to be applied to win group experience points that give abilities that favors the group. Example: a PC with the role of a traitor gains points when they advance a step in a betrayal narrative in relation to another player. Rarely keeps track of NPC relationships only when it is an outlier like a very positive interaction. The most important aspects would be good neighborhood, frictions, prejudice, mistrust, good festive experience (getting hammered together). No.

DM shield notes, world anvil. Interactions with NPCs and ambitions (if the PC wants to be seen as a hero by the city they must keep track if the PC is taking steps on that direction so that they can recompense the actions and make it full circle).

They try to not frustrate the player or make their abilities useless. Skills, attributes, items and spells to see how they are going to design encounters so that the players can enjoy and express their characters' capacities. Yes, exhaustion levels. Stuff that is not on the sheet is easily forgotten and they think exhaustion levels are an interesting mechanic to explore. Privileges individual aspects. Players hardly architect an action flux coordinately, unless the situation is very atypical. They design according to the capacities that can be explored and if the players do not explore it at least they gave them the opportunity. To encourage collaboration and coordination, they think of a few encounters that demand more work, difficulty beyond the succession of individual initiatives. They complexity the scenario, such as putting the players and villain in a mobile pendular platform, adding various elements to pay attention. The very difficult encounter is made for them to think collectively and that is up to them. Yes, tanks can take more damage than a PC that has lower life and will zero if you hit. In order to not frustrate the player you have to prioritize the attack.

20 and 1. Three consecutives 1 ( $1/20^3$ ).

### Interview 4

Online, even notes are all digital. They use roll20, discord (to take notes and schedule sessions), [token generators](#), [inkarnate](#) for maps, reddit for images.

Challenge level using an encounter calculator, but mostly DMed pre-made campaigns to use. For adicional encounters they check if it fits with the original adventure. First they think about which monster would be cool then they check if it is in the desired level.

They prefer that the players maintain the relationships in their character sheets. A table of all can be too much stuff concentrated in one place, so this way they can go directly to the player. The most important factor is the type of relationship (good x neutral x bad) and whether it

is “rivalry/nemesis/arch enemy” when bad or “super ally” when positive. It is interesting when the party itself embraces that. No, only once when the specific adventure required that.

Accesses the sheet directly. Mechanistically consults hp, attributes and abilities a lot (proficiencies and class abilities in general). For inventory they trust the players and do not pay much attention. No, the sheet is pretty thorough. They once quantified the PCs alignment using a table, but that was for a very specific campaign. For pre-made campaigns you do not have much of an option. For extra adventures for character arch they think of mechanics for each PC to have their time to shine. All characters are very unique. They compare players regarding roleplay, if one that is very immersed died the party would get loose itself and in terms of mechanics they notice things like if a character is more powerful.

1 and 20, rolling a lot of 11 is normal. If they roll three 1 they stay a good time not using that die and two 20 in a roll the die feels special.

### Interview 5

Both, mostly online because of the pandemic. They use roll20 and discord, sometimes only discord with a shared spreadsheet and they tried notion for a homebrew but did not work out.

They use the Monsters Manual and browse by challenge level and check for the setting (they are not going to put a desert monster in the forest). Enjoys creating monsters using already existing stats.

No, usually the players themselves remember. When is something memorable they take into consideration but do not annotate, even because they DMed mostly on-shots.

When needed they use roll20 handouts and the players themselves take notes. Does not organize too much, prefers to improvise. Curses, promises, stuff that is relevant and can be used in favor or against the PC. Passive perception, main stats and whoever has the higher score for a group skill check. Yes, party inventory and money, pets because the players do not have access to each other’s character sheet. By group and if they defeat too easily they increase the difficulty next time. No

They do not check only criticals. Too many fails, the die is cursed. A lot of successes, the die is good.

### Interview 6

They start their ideas on paper and then when an idea can be expanded they use a doc. Uses google docs, dnd beyond, roll20, and dnd wikidot for rules.

Mainly coherence with the story and less the challenge level. If a monster fits the story they modify the strength. They research on dnd beyond, encounter generators, Monster’s Manual and get inspired by other campaigns/games. A lot of times they just create it themselves and modify existing stats.

Tries to keep track. Lists by city all the NPCs and writes a brief summary of them and adds how they connect to other characters. If it is a family, they cluster them and put it on their bio. Top to bottom, macro to micro approach: city > group (work, where they go to) > individual. The potential to create stories, how the characters can evolve as you interact, the dynamics. If the relationship is friendly, why and how is it, how can that relate to other relationships, how can it evolve and alter the course of the campaign/story. PC-PC relations are not worth keeping

track of, because each player already knows how they are going to act. PC-NPC also does not keep track, as it is more dynamic and they remember who does not like each other and the interaction to roleplay. The annotate more NPC-NPC to guide what their personalities are.

They create folders of the possible things they want to use, things the PCs mention about their past, how can they expand on that with the player without them even noticing. People from the PC's past, background, the way they see the world in order to try to make the world more dynamic/lived in. In game aspects they use passive perception and armor class a lot so that they do not need to ask the players all the time, and speed, saving throws, hp. It depends on what they want for the campaign, but usually in group. They try to make the monster not able to kill a character in one shot, but in general decide by group to not give too much time to one particular person or focus on one story only. Yes, in terms of comparing hp/tanks, to encourage someone to do something they have more ability on or not. In general tries to not stir it too much so that it is not forced.

Can not deny dice because they do not have a lot of them and are not superstitious about it. They use all the dice in the same frequency or use more the ones they are more use to or like the style more.

### Interview 7

Online, using roll20 and dnd beyond.

Challenge level, quantity of PCs in the party and place of combat. They use <http://dnd5e.wikidot.com/>.

Yes, on a dedicated page. What interests them the most are conflicts of interest. It is fun to create conflict, for friendship and romance it is up to the players and does not matter much. Yes, they use a +/- relationship points system from the Strixhaven module.

They annotate on paper or a google doc (they have a master document with all the characters). It is useful for trauma, fears, backstory friends, enemies made throughout the game. Skills and saving throws. Yes, reactions they have to something, if the character gets scared they take note in case they need to scare them again or if a character found out something about another NPC. By group, if they are low level. They structure the dungeons, for example, with 3 challenges for one session and they want the players to pass it but not too high. If one character has high dexterity then they add a strength challenge, or if a lot of PCs are good with lockpicking they change the idea. To know how many PCs can pass an obstacle they think of who can surpass the dc (difficulty class) and if there are too many of them they redesign. Yes, in terms of possible interpretations. You expect an old and a young character to react differently to the problems brought to them and if they do not act accordingly to expectations they try to find out why.

Six consecutive results under 10 to change die and the opposite to consider it lucky. Easily superstitious with d&d.

Obs:

### Strixhaven Relationship Points

Player characters will have the option to gain Relationship Points over the course of the adventure. These points reflect the relationship status a character has with another NPC.

All relationships start at 0, and either increase or decrease by 1 depending on the nature of the characters interactions. A friendly response will earn a positive relationship point, while a rivalrous response will earn a negative relationship point.

-A player can indicate that they would like to attempt to gain a positive Relationship point with an NPC, but this is at the discretion of the DM

-Conversely a player can take a negative relationship point with an NPC at any point at their own discretion, once per-character, per-day.

\*Relationship Points and Status:

+/- 0 Neutral

+1 Friendly: While they are still getting to know you, the NPC is positively inclined towards you

-1 Antagonistic: Something about you just ticks this NPC off

+2 Friend: This NPC considers you a personal friend, and will go out of their way to assist you as best they can

-2 Rival: This NPC holds a great disdain for you, and will make your life harder any chance they get

+3 Beloved: You have a deep and meaningful connection with this NPC. While not inherently romantic, you are deeply bonded, so much so that you benefit from this NPC's spirit, even when they aren't physically near you (You gain this NPC's Beloved Boon)

+3 Enemy: This NPC hates you with every fiber of their being. They are extremely motivated to go out of their way to thwart your endeavors, and may even go so far as to physically harm you. Their hatred of you is so elemental it begins to affect your everyday life, even when this NPC isn't physically present (You suffer from this NPC's Enemy Bane)

## Interview 8

Before the pandemic in paper, but now online using roll20 and google doc with the script.

They go by what fits in the plot and if there is an interesting map/scenario to go with it. Usually they use the d&d books, but to make sure it is compatible with the players' level they use an encounter calculator to balance medium-hard.

No, most of the time they keep it in memory, as most of their NPC are somewhat ludicrous they do not need to remember much details. Fun, they try to create characters that are very different from each other to interact with the players.

Usually they do not take notes, but for specific stuff they used the DM notes in roll20. Which character/player has an item they give them in a previous session, if a relationship with an NPC was formed. Social matters like ideals, flaws,etc. to explore, because that is what the players use as a base for their stories. They do not care much about stats. Usually they propose challenges not focusing on individual characteristics, they leave it to secondary things. All

players should have the same qualifications to complete a puzzle and battle. They try not to compare, but sometimes use the story from one PC to complement another.

They do not think about that, as they also do not own a lot of dice.

### Interview 9

The pandemic turned it to mainly digital, with online rpg you can play with people outside your city. They are slowly going back to in person games like they used to play pre-covid and even then the online tools helped. They use roll20 and have not tried yet but want to test Owlbear Rodeo <https://www.owlbear.rodeo/> e Talespire <https://store.steampowered.com/app/720620/TaleSpire/>. Also name and token generators <https://rolladvantage.com/> <https://paper-tokens.firebaseio.com/>, base game book compilers (such as wikidot), inkarnate, <https://donjon.bin.sh/5e/dungeon/>, <https://tetra-cube.com/dnd/dnd-statblock.html>, <https://www.reddit.com/r/battlemaps/>.

They use the d&d books and <https://www.themonstersknow.com/>. First they like to have a general notion of what they want from that encounter to make sense. For an arctic region you expect polar bears, arctic wolves, monsters related to ice. Or you could add an unexpected factor to spark the players' interest. Why would a fire elemental be in an arctic region? They develop the why (not pure chaos) and focus on the narrative. They think it is interesting to break/subvert expectations (like adding a pacific orc) to engage or not (it is important to know your party). It is not worth investing much in political games if your party just wants to beat up monsters. Part of the entertainment of the DM is creating the world and describing things, they play too. To pick the monsters it varies, published adventures give you a limited option (but that does not impede you from adapting to your party). When creating their own adventure it's up to the proposal's discretion. To bring a mindflayer/demogorgon into a world with only humans and beasts (monstrous animals) breaks the rules of the world you created and the players' immersion. At the mechanical level, they observe the challenge level, the guide line system from the easy to mortal encounter. You can fill up an adventure with a lot of easy obstacles, because you have time. But for the deadliest there is a chance of a character dying. Sometimes the proposal is an absurd encounter to make players think outside the box or trigger an escape. If you achieve the purpose for that encounter without breaking immersion and not leaving anyone unsatisfied, then you did the work with mastery.

Usually they let the players free. They applied the Strixhaven mechanics to a homebrew once but they did not play long enough for that to come up. In their opinion it works well to let things flow naturally, 70% of the DM's work is improvising only 30% is actual planning. That includes planned NPCs. Sometimes you plan an awesome NPC you think the players are going to love but when you play that NPC is outshined by a random NPC you created at a pinch. They use paper or doc. They think it is interesting the collective storytelling that can be generated by the players feeling free to interact with the world. Another aspect is the organic relationships that can be formed by roleplaying above all, which is the special flavour rpg has; you can see players interacting mechanically elsewhere. They tried Strixhaven like mentioned, but generally do not quantify because that is organic and quantifying could break the immersion.

When playing virtually they check the character sheet on roll20 and take mental notes. Personality traits, ideals, flaws helps to know what to expect from the characters. That can also act as a summary of that character, but sometimes does not show all the layers involved. Yes,

the PC's story and both the character's and player's behavior to make sure no one is being excluded. Also the PC's general vibe, the general idea the player has for the character (a fighter does not say much about a PC, but if you know battlemaster you can infer they are in a leadership role), nuances that are only clarified with good communication. Ideals, passive perception, proficiencies, skills and the obvious ones for combat (hp, ac, speed, initiative). A sheet of paper can not transcribe all from the Player's Handbook and there is stuff you can not know by heart. No, the character sheet is pretty thorough. The particularities are in the player's administration of the sheet. Even though it is intuitive, it has a lot of information for a beginner. They say they have to work a lot on that point, they get stuck in the narrative and focus more on it making sense than on the players. Ideally it should be a bit of each. Example: 5 wizards have intelligence to spare, to make an encounter fun without knocking over players, you have to consider a strength test would fuck everyone up. Conversely, they could end up running over your combat and get too easy. For the character, planning and making an encounter fit well gets people to talking about it a long time later. You can use a character's background and make a monk's master reappear as evil and make the combat personal, touching the character and player. Mechanically they have to explore the player's abilities so that they do not abuse the encounter with an end-all spell for example. When you cut an hydra head another one grows so typically the character has to set fire to it, but the DM can subvert expectation and have the fire accelerate the process of growing another head and the PC has to use ice or lightning, improvise on the spot. They need also to pay attention to what they reward the players, careful not to shoot themselves in the foot. Yes, when paying attention to the party ecosystem. Ex if two PCs have 18 and 19 of strength and they keep stepping on each other's feet can generate internal conflict between players because they are fulfilling the same tank role/function. Without a secondary function you can resort to roleplay, but the DM must be aware of this. Having a party of 5 wizards has to be decided collectively so they don't run each other over and compete. It is interesting to compare how characters do by pulling two similar ones to another focus. Demand the players a little, one can be well immersed and cannot expect the same level of engagement from all but give a reminder to those who are not so much, to consider what to improve.

Dice is expensive, they don't have the luxury of switching cursed dice. They know ways to measure if a die is biased, using a saturated solution a standard die will float. They consider their superstition not for dice, but for person. A person is unlucky or lucky. Three 20, several 1. A bad roll is 1 to 7 more or less, 8 to 13 is acceptable/average, 14 upwards is a good roll.