Old School Hacks Vol.2:

Player Roles

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GUILD

Old School Hacks Vol.2: Player Roles

This guide for players provides advice, options, tools, and handouts for helping your DM make the game easier to run and add Old School-style gameplay in 5th Edition Dungeons & Dragons. Take the role of caller, mapper, timekeeper, quartermaster, or rules coordinator and use the provided handouts and illustrations to optimize your D&D games!

Credits

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neuronphaser.com is the brainchild of Tim Bannock, a 30+ year D&D veteran and RPG enthusiast dedicated to creating the tools and sharing the tips you need to optimize your tabletop roleplaying experience.

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Special Thanks

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Changelog

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Introduction

Thousands of pages have been spent on the ideal of what old school gameplay might have been, from the principles behind it to the actual processes and tools used at the game table to make these things happen. For scores of reasons, the "one, true way" wasn't as widespread as many believe, largely died out in the late 1980s, or was lost when Dungeons & Dragons creators Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson passed away. Those legends and rumors may or may not have varying degrees of truth, but simply put there are a lot of ways to approach roleplaying games in general, D&D in specific, and what parts of the D&D experience are fun for each individual gamer in particular. Still, for many players there's an allure to the idea of mapping, managing group loot, handling NPC hirelings and henchmen, and determining how much of the busy-work is handled behind the DM screen or delegated to the players.

That allure is the inspiration for this short compilation of advice, useful tools, and mechanical options that groups can employ in varying measures to capture an old school style. Use none, some, or all of it to decrease the workload of the Dungeon Master, delegate tasks to the people that most enjoy them, and streamline the information that your gaming group uses to optimize the experience of playing a roleplaying game.

Take a look around, and try out a few options for a couple sessions to see how they work for you and your gaming buddies!

How Do I Use This Book?

Much of the content of Player Roles originally appeared in the neuronphaser supplement Hexcrawling: Wilderness Exploration and Random Encounters in a player-centric chapter about handling "hexcrawl" campaigns: the detailed creation of a hex-based map with a bunch of encounter tables and hidden sites that the PCs explore hex by hex. The information has been rewritten from the ground up for clarity and significantly expanded with additional advice, illustrative pictures, ideas for props and tools you can use at your gaming table, and a few handouts to help manage information.

Each chapter starts by defining a player role -- Caller, Mapper, Quartermaster, Timekeeper, and Rules Coordinator -- and then presenting the advice, tools, and options that can best optimize the tasks expected of each role. The idea here is to make each role fun, so streamlining work loads, providing cool handouts, or suggesting different techniques all go towards turning what some people think of as tedious bookkeeping into an exciting and useful part of the gaming experience. Spreading "the work" of roleplaying games around to multiple players gives the DM time to focus on fun campaigns, adventures, and encounters, and gives players stuff to do between their turns during combat or while PCs are split up to tend to individual downtime, shopping, or roleplaying activities.

What's In It?

Here's a brief rundown of what you'll find inside, organized in sections by role and topic.

1. The Caller is the spokesperson for the group, whether this means being the leader of the party of player characters or simply managing strategies, bookkeeping, or NPC hirelings.

2. The Mapper tracks the movement of the party through the campaign world or through the current dungeon site in the adventures they play.

3. The Quartermaster manages the inventory and/or shopping concerns of the party, such as "group loot,"

encumbrance concerns, pack animals, gear shopping or selling lists, and the like.

4. The Timekeeper tracks short- and long-term passage of time as it relates to the campaign world (perhaps using a setting-specific calendar), durations of magical effects, round-by-round combat activities or bookkeeping, and/or a journal of the party's exploits.

5. The Rules Coordinator is tasked with keeping copies of the rulebooks on hand to look up specific mechanics that might be called into question during a game session, allowing the DM and other players to keep things moving while the Rules Coordinator references things like ability checks, condition effects, or downtime activity rules.

Let's get on with it!

Making the DM's Life Easier

… But before we do, let's take a moment to note some other, more universal ways players can make their DM's life more enjoyable and ease their workload.

Get on the same page. Before the campaign begins, decisions should already be made as to the general alignment composition of the party, whether there might be PVP (player vs. player) combat, and how much or how little inter-factional antagonism there might be in the party. But that's not where these decisions and talking points should end. The players should discuss not only their characters' goals and methods, but also their own goals for the campaign in terms of style, tone, and potential end-goals for their characters. Being on the same page ensures there isn't any unnecessary friction between the players over how they roleplay their characters, or what downtime activities they might pursue that could interrupt the flow of the game for the other folks at the table.

Figure out how to divvy up loot. Although players don't have to drill down to every possible weapon type when determining how to split the fruits of their dungeon delving, they should give some thought to how they divide up coins, gems, art objects, ammunition, and consumables. Mentioning a few ideas on who gets what weapons or armor isn't a bad idea. If henchmen and hirelings are an expected resource the party plans to use, it's probably a good idea to figure out how to divide most coin-valued loot into "shares" so it's easy to pay hirelings in "half-shares" or something similar to keep them loyal but not necessarily cut too heavily into the group's profits.

Figure out how to work with hirelings, henchmen, and mounts. Determining who runs NPC hangers-on in combat (usually the players split these NPCs among them) vs. out of combat (usually the DM roleplays the NPCs as needed) is important, but so too is how to best organize their information. Full character sheets are often unnecessary, so figuring out how to photocopy or type up and print out shortened stat blocks, and knowing who holds onto them between sessions is all useful stuff to hammer out.

Continuously collaborate on new Standard Operating Procedures. While some of the roles we'll explore in this document talk about strategy and tactics, it's a good idea for the players as a group to determine the best marching order, the best way for the party to explore for secret doors, locks, and traps, and the best way to ensure they aren't bunched up when they are the targets of fireballs but are close together when the cleric starts slinging area-affecting healing spells.

Now, onto the Player Roles!

1. *The Caller*

The caller is a spokesperson for the players, acting as both a motivator ("Come on guys, let's make a decision!") and a go-between so that the DM understands the big picture of the entire party's actions. A caller doesn't necessarily speak for the group all the time, and can't override an individual's choices, but should be seen as more of a project manager for getting things sorted out and presented to the DM. This might include collating shopping lists or selling lists in town, setting the final list of marching order, and noting things like "Standard Operating Procedure" for the party when they come to a new site or settlement.

Some of the things that a caller might want to keep handy:
• Marching order
• Passive Perception scores
• A general procedure for clearing an area (or doorway) of traps, including relative positions and distances of party members with regard to each other
• A wishlist of future gear

An exceptional caller might also be the go-to person for additional blank character sheets, spell sheets, and inventory sheets. Basically, anything that can help organize the player's side of things could theoretically be handled by the caller at some point, so it pays to keep them involved with other roles and tasks.

A caller doesn't necessarily need to be the best strategist in the group, nor do they have to be an experienced player. Some folks just naturally gravitate towards keeping track of things for the group as a whole, and these people make great callers. If you have the other player roles filled out nicely and everyone does their job well, the caller's role can actually be quite easy, and in small groups it's often entirely unnecessary since other roles will be much more useful. For these reasons, the caller is a great secondary role, or a great role that can be shifted to different players every session or two.

Variations on the Caller

Co-Dungeon Master

Particularly savvy players or folks experienced in DMing their own campaigns or adventures can always pick up the role of Co-Dungeon Master, but it's one that is very hard to balance properly and perform well. The ur-DM is the one with all the lore and campaign notes, so the Co-DM's place may be hard to figure out the boundaries for, particularly in regards to roleplaying situations.

A good use of a Co-DM is running minor and unintelligent monsters during battles so there's no need to "spoil the plot" to the co-DM by feeling forced to give them knowledge and campaign notes the players don't already have access to. They are also great for handling hirelings and henchmen for the party, especially if there are enough of them that it's too much work for the DM to roleplay them in conversations, and/or if other players aren't comfortable running anything beyond their own individual character. If you use battle maps and terrain, a Co-DM can prep new maps or minis for future encounters simply by handing them a map and saying, "Draw out that room" on the dry-erase mat you use.

Another, more involved version of the Co-DM is a person who actually takes over full Dungeon Mastering duties every few sessions, but runs their adventures in the same campaign and with the rest of the party using their existing characters. The key to making this work well is making sure the campaign world is easily shared (published campaign settings obviously work very well), both DMs portray the details of the world consistently, and the DM-turned-player's character isn't in any way favored in this setup. Having characters that seem to know more and gain more simply because they are played by one of the DMs is sometimes colloquially referred to as a DMPC (for Dungeon Master Player Character) and is often accompanied with a derisive tone because they are seen as being played with favoritism and having access to knowledge or information about the campaign world or the specific adventures that other

player characters are not. It's a fine balancing act, but the simplest solution is running disconnected adventures that the other DM has no insight into when they are acting as a player. As long as both DMs adhere to some agreed upon standards of encounter difficulty levels and expected rewards (especially in terms of magic items), then there shouldn't be any problems.

Tools of the Trade

Callers can make use of any tool to organize the thoughts of the party, their actions, and lists. 3x5 index cards always work for short lists (such as Passive Perception scores and gear wishlists), and so do minis for establishing marching order. The tools of other roles may come in handy, too, such as inventory sheets for group loot (or as another way to compile shopping lists with a lot more info for easier referencing), or a campaign calendar to take some notes on (see 4. The Timekeeper).

Be on the lookout for any products or digital tools for "Party Trackers." Often these are bite-sized little snippets of information extracted from the players' character sheets and allow for some high-level game mechanics knowledge at a quick glance. Perception scores are the obvious use for such things, but if your caller is a strategic thinker, having the party's Armor Class ratings and max Hit Point scores handy can help the caller come up with some tactics in the midst of the fray. Such tools also might allow the caller to take over some of the duties of tracking combat effects like spell durations, condition effects, or other things, especially if you are combining this role with the Timekeeper.

Name	
Align.	
Race	
Class	

Armor class — Max. hit points — Passive perception

Name	
Align.	
Race	
Class	

Armor class — Max. hit points — Passive perception

Name	
Align.	
Race	
Class	

Armor class — Max. hit points — Passive perception

Name	
Align.	
Race	
Class	

Armor class — Max. hit points — Passive perception

Name	
Align.	
Race	
Class	

Armor class — Max. hit points — Passive perception

Name	
Align.	
Race	
Class	

Armor class — Max. hit points — Passive perception

Marching order

Single file

Front

Rear

Side by side

Front

Rear

Party tracker

2. The Mapper

The mapper creates and maintains any maps for the party, from the player-version of the campaign hex map to the individual dungeon maps of any given session. Mappers should consider having additional hex and grid paper on hand due to the teleporting nature of many dungeon traps! Also, consider maintaining a "final" version of important maps (especially the larger campaign hex map) that isn't drawn on until after a session ends, or at some other larger break, thus ensuring that mistakes aren't frequent, or can be run past the DM for additional clarification.

The mapper is one of the most classically hated (or feared) roles because it seems like an exacting job, or like an especially demanding artistic one, but that shouldn't be the case. We'll discuss some different ways to draw (or build) maps that ease this burden, but it's also a matter of framing the job of this role: the mapper is a visual record keeper for the party's journeys. Artistic folks will love the role for what it is, but those who don't should look at this as a chance to tell their character's version of the story with as much or as little effort as they want. Additionally, no matter how accurate you want to make your maps, chances are that there will be errors that are effectively done on purpose. Traps like sliding walls, hidden doors, magical mazes, and teleporting areas can all make the layout of the dungeon awfully fluid.

Combining the mapper role with others is easy, but consideration must be made for the workload. Based on your chosen style of mapping (see below), there could be a lot of time-consuming demands that would get in the way of tracking combat-related effects in the heat of the moment, or worrying about henchmen actions. That said, the mapper combines well with the timekeeper role, especially for creating a record of events that occur in each room or significant area on a map. A keyed map with some descriptive text makes for a great, shorthand journal of the deeds of your adventuring party.

Tools of the Trade

Graph and hex paper are almost a must (but see below...), and even then a ruler and similar tools (such as a compass) can be extremely useful for getting particular details down. During a session, the mapper can even use index cards or post-it notes (such as the smaller bookmark-style ones) to fashion quick notes and place them in a logical layout, transferring this information to the final map at the end of the session (or even between sessions).

Some styles of creating the map(s) will require or suggest different tools. Let's take a look.

Mapping Style

There are a lot of ways to map a campaign world or a session's dungeon location. While it's easy to try and emulate the style of mapping found in Dungeons & Dragons products or that you might find online, the key to making the role of a mapper fun and streamlined at the gaming table is to find the style that works best for you. It has to be relatively fast, and it can't be so demanding that it either slows down the detail descriptions provided by the DM or distracts the mapper from picking up on the fun stuff that is going on in the dungeon. Drawing exacting scales and furniture placements at the expense of hearing that 1d6+2 **owlbears** with *goggles of true sight* are charging at you is a problem.
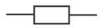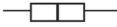
Traditional Mapping
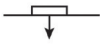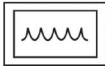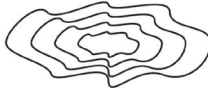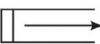
Grid or hex paper, a pencil or a set of colored pencils, and maybe a ruler and compass are the old school way to depict a map of wherever it is that your characters are currently adventuring.

The benefit of traditional mapping styles is that there's a body of work stretching back to the 70's that provides useful shorthand map keys to depict various important features of a location, whether it's "how to draw hills versus mountains" or "draw an S through a secret door and an arrow pointing to the right for a sliding door". Also, you can find graph paper at most dollar shops, along with whatever supplies you need to fill it in. It may be worth a couple test runs of redrawing existing maps you find in an adventure or online to get the most out of what supplies you prefer and figure out how to do it quickly.

The drawbacks are plenty, though, and are classically what makes mapping a theoretical pain in the butt for some folks. Trying to get the exact scale and shape of a room or hallway down is difficult and can be time-consuming unless the rooms are all squares and rectangles and all the hallways turn at 90 degree angles. The DM needs to take the time to learn to describe distances as the party moves down a corridor, and to give accurate -- even if incomplete -- information regarding the size and shape of various dungeon locations.

A couple tricks to shore up these flaws follows. One is for the DM to provide player maps, and then the mapper's job is really to note what was found in each room, or to denote which rooms were never entered or explored fully. Another might be for the mapper to collaborate with the DM only after a room or series of room has been explored. Both ideas require some agreement ahead of time, and it behooves both DM and mapper to put aside any frustrations in incorrect mapping so long as the "general gist of the thing" is captured.

Map Key

Door	Statue
Double door	Pillar
Secret door	Well
One-way door	Pool
False door	Fireplace
Revolving door	Table
Archway door	Chairs
Open doorway	Bed
Portcullis	Curtain
Bars	Arrow slit
Covered pit trap	Railing
Open pit	Illusory wall
Trap	Crevasse
Stairs	Pool or lake
Slide trap	Elevated ledge
Ladder	

Flowchart Mapping

If accuracy is problematic, you can resort to shorthand methods of creating maps, such as "flowchart" style mapping. Instead of getting scale, dimensions, shapes, and placement down pat, you're simply circling a number in the order that you enter rooms or arrive at locations, drawing lines or other symbols connecting these circles to denote doors, stairs, and hallways, and writing up a quick location description based on those numbers. See the illustration for more detail.

CAVES OF THE KOBOLD CULT, LEVEL I

1. 4 dire weasels! treasure: 80 cp
2. Pit trap! Leroy died!
3.
4.
5.
6. Armory: 7 spears, 25 daggers; secret door - couldn't unlock it!
7.
8.
9.
10.
11. 76 skeletons! Doors ▸ stairs down to lower level (next page!)
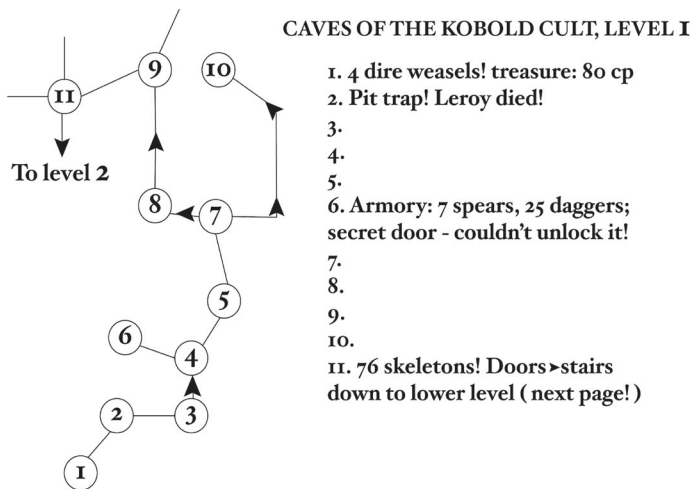
Some useful symbols:
• Number with a circle around it: a room. The number is referenced in the map key with a brief description of whatever the players encountered there.
• Line connecting two circles: a corridor.
• Triangle connecting two circles, or connecting lines and circles: a stairway leading between two locations or to/from corridors. The broad side touching a room/corridor represents the top of the stairs and the point touching another location represents the bottom of the stairs, relative to the surface.

Mappers can get a little crafty with their shapes, using squares to represent rooms or attempting to draw the general shape of a room, but without any effort to capture scale. If a room or corridor requires special notes about scale, leave that for the map key descriptions, otherwise you'll be adding dimensional numbers and notations all over the flowchart and it'll be a mess.

Getting Crafty

Do you have lots of post-it notes (especially smaller sized ones)? Why not use those to write room and location notes and then slap them on a piece of paper in a vaguely relative position to one another in order to create a map!

Want to preserve your maps? Make sure to keep them all in the same notebook or binder, or a campaign-specific notebook if you're so lucky as to play in multiple. Some graph paper is sold in bound notebooks, making it even easier to map on one page and write out a key and notes for the rooms on the facing page.

If you're using loose-leaf sheets of mapping paper, consider picking up some page protectors or laminating them as the campaign winds down in order to keep a record of your adventures!

Going Digital

Have your laptop handy? Why not try mapping in a spreadsheet program by formatting the individual cells to a standard square size and treating each one as if it's a 5 foot space, like on a battlemap? There are also dozens of purpose-built programs to generate dungeon maps, and these can often be used to build such a map tile-by-tile. Dungeonographer and Hexographer by Inkwell Ideas are some fairly simple programs that you can save locally on your laptop, and most tablets and smartphones have drawing programs so you can make a digital version of a flowchart-style map.

3. The Quartermaster

The quartermaster is the player that manages the survival-horror aspect of hexcrawling: gear and encumbrance. Having the right equipment can be a matter of life or death in an extended wilderness or dungeon journey, but carrying everything you might need could weigh down the party, slowing their moving, inhibiting their ability to remain stealthy, creating other problems in the heat of a battle, or forcing hard choices when especially difficult terrain must be navigated and packs left behind in order to do so!

Often, players are expected (and expecting) to manage only their own character sheet, but it pays to have someone on deck to record loot (not just what, but where it was gained and/or sold) or even keep a current calculation of encumbrance for all of the characters. Folks that are good at math or extremely organized can be great in this role, though it is time-consuming. If players do track their own characters' gear and encumbrance, they could simply submit their final encumbrance or weight to the quartermaster, and/or the quartermaster simply keeps track of party-only, shared resources, which could be property, loans, debts (of money or honor), or "consumables" like rations, water, and healing potions.

This role often requires a lot of discussion before being implemented, but can reduce the workload of all other players (and the worries of the DM) when handled properly. As such, it's a great role to combine with a caller or rules coordinator, but it's an incredible burden when combined with mapping or in-depth timekeeping roles.

Tools of the Trade

Graph paper for easily organizing lists of items and numbers in columns is super-helpful, and double for any mapping needs. Custom inventory sheets can be found on dmsguild.com and through various websites, and these may prove especially beneficial if the party has beasts of burden, wagons, or other means of transporting either large amounts of supplies or especially large pieces of equipment, including treasure chests hauled out of a dungeon.

If the quartermaster is only in charge of consumables, ammo, or small categories of information (final encumbrance scores of each party member, maybe), a 3x5 index card may be enough, or a few piles of differently colored tokens to represent things like rations and water. Finding ways to simplify the record keeping through tokens and a cheat sheet of what the tokens represent (and the particulars of those things, such as weight) can keep the quartermaster from having to burn holes through their paper by constantly erasing and updating numbers and quantities. Another option is using smaller sized post-it notes that can be moved around or replaced to represent different consumable items.

Combining multiple post-its and tokens with the aforementioned inventory sheets is a robust system that is very streamlined, but also can get unwieldy if you have a small party or not that much gear, relatively speaking. Make sure you're not overdoing it with the props, as this might eat up valuable table space best used for battle maps and dice rolling!

Useful Lists

The following lists compile general information from the D&D rules regarding consumables, containers, and light sources. You'll find this useful for building methods to track these items on inventory sheets, group loot tables, post-it notes, or 3x5 index cards.

Consumables

A standard character requires 1 pound of food per day (but can subsist on half a pound while slowly accumulating days that might lead to Exhaustion) and 1 gallon (or 8 pints) of water per day. In hot environments, they require 2 gallons (16 pints) of water per day.

- **Rations:** sold in 2 pound containers and lasts 2 days (1 pound of food per day).
- **Waterskin:** a full waterskin weighs 5 pounds and carries 4 pints of liquid, which is only half of what a character needs for 1 day (or a quarter if they are in a hot environment).

Containers

- **Backpack:** 1 cubic foot; 30 pounds of gear. A backpack itself weighs 5 pounds.
- **Barrel:** 40 gallons liquid, 4 cubic feet solid. A barrel itself weights about 70 pounds.
- **Basket:** 2 cubic feet; 40 pounds of gear. A basket usually weighs 2 pounds.
- **Bottle:** 1.5 pints liquid. A glass bottle weighs 2 pounds.
- **Bucket:** 3 gallons liquid, 0.5 cubic foot solid. A bucket weighs 2 pounds.
- **Chest:** 12 cubic feet/300 pounds of gear. A typical chest weighs about 25 pounds.
- **Flask or tankard:** 1 pint liquid. These items weight 1 pound.
- **Jug or pitcher:** 1 gallon liquid. A jug or pitcher generally weighs about 4 pounds.
- **Pot, iron:** 1 gallon liquid. An iron pot weighs 10 pounds.
- **Pouch:** 0.2 (or one-fifth) cubic foot; 6 pounds of gear. On its own, a pouch weighs 1 pound.
- **Sack:** 1 cubic foot/30 pounds of gear. A sack weighs about 0.5 pounds.
- **Vial:** 4 ounces liquid. On its own, a glass vial has negligible weight with regards to calculating encumbrance.
- **Waterskin:** 4 pints liquid. A full waterskin weighs about 5 pounds; empty, they weigh the same as a sack (0.5 pounds).

Light Sources

- **Candle:** lasts 1 hour, sheds bright light in a 5 foot radius and dim light for an additional 5 feet.
- **Lamp:** burns on 1 pint of oil for 6 hours and sheds bright light up to a 15 radius and dim light an additional 30 feet.
- **Lanterns:** burns for 6 hours on 1 pint of oil. A bullseye lantern casts a cone of bright light up to 60 feet and dim light for an additional 60 feet. A hooded lantern casts bright light up to 30 feet and dim light an additional 30 feet (or dim light in a 5 foot radius if the hood is closed).
- **Torch:** lasts 1 hour, providing bright light up to a 20 foot radius and dim light an additional 20 feet.

4. The Timekeeper

The Timekeeper tracks both the short-term and long-term passage of time in the game universe. This might be as advanced as recording historical lore uncovered, maintaining a calendar of big events or a journal of every event, or simply ticking off rounds, minutes, hours, and days on a piece of scratch paper to help track spell durations, condition effects, and so on. Either way, when someone asks "what time of day is it?" the timekeeper should probably have the answer in case the DM forgot. Additionally, they should be asking the question, "how long does that take?" so the DM stays honest.

The role of the timekeeper is one of detail, but it's an easy role to dial up or down the amount of detail that is handled. For a one-shot game or a series of short, barely connected dungeon delves, the timekeeper is probably just tracking rounds and maybe the occasional hour in order to know when spell durations end or when the torchlight suddenly goes out. It may help to keep a list of common light sources and their effective lifespan on hand in order to do this.

In the case of a long-term campaign, the timekeeper's job can be expanded to involve a game setting-specific calendar (The Calendar of Harptos is not only the go-to calendar for the Forgotten Realms, it's also a product that neuronphaser has published on dmsguild. com!) so that days, moon phases, festivals, and other events are tracked. Some groups want journals or blog-based writeups of the events of any given session, and a timekeeper is a great person to cover that, if they want to. Don't like long prose? Simply make short, bulleted lists; the mapper may already be doing something of the sort if they use keyed location maps and note what encounters occur. Like writing out in-character thoughts? A journal that's updated in-between sessions is a great tool, but can be a bit time-consuming. Making use of technologies like private social media group

pages, recording your game sessions for Twitch or YouTube, or having a blog maintained through the many roleplaying game-specific "campaign tools" out there are all fantastic, and can be handled by the timekeeper, the DM, the other players...everyone can get involved, so it's not too much work for any individual. It's up to the group to decide how involved the timekeeper is in that specific task.

Variations on the Timekeeper

Initiative Tracker

The Timekeeper or another player can track initiative as well, releasing the DM from this burden. This is an excellent and easy way for a player to get more involved in combat encounters even when it's not their turn, and helps them to learn some of the intricacies of combat rules as a result. That makes a great job for a new player, but if it's too much of a burden for an individual, it's an easy role for more experienced players to run with.

Look for combat pads or magnetic whiteboards (and magnets with names or images on them) as an excellent visual reference for tracking turn sequence during combat. Graph paper or individual index cards work, too, the latter of which can serve as an excellent randomizing tool outside of combat. Simply shuffle the character and/or monster cards and draw one at random!

Some DMs track initiative via post-it notes or clips running along the top of their DM screen. As long as doing so won't damage the screen, players can take this duty by either clipping/sticking stuff to the player-facing side of the DM screen, or simply have a three-ring binder handy and using that surface for this sort of thing.

Variant Initiative Order

Over the course of a long campaign, the initiative roll is the kind of thing that is subject to relatively low modifiers (Dexterity bonus and, very rarely, a static bonus from a Feat or class ability) and is generally established at the outset of a combat encounter and

rarely changes drastically. When it does, it's usually the insertion of a new party to the fight at some point in the acting order, or it'll be because some character moved to a lower spot in the acting order for some tactical reason, or do to some effect that delays them. It's not something a given character can really optimize to any degree, and even if they do, the chances of rolling a 1 on a d20 doesn't change, so over a few hundred rolls, minor bonuses almost disappear when you do the math out to figure out average results.

Because of this, initiative is precisely the kind of rule that can be streamlined and abstracted for ease of use. Choose a die type, roll it without modifiers, and simply count backwards from the highest number on that die, with people acting based on their die roll (and thus, highest roll goes first). I personally use a d10: everybody rolls 1d10, I group most monsters together by type (the 6 goblins go on whatever I rolled on their d10 while the 2 worgs go on whatever I rolled on their separate d10), and then I start counting backwards from 10.

It makes initiative order placement incredibly fast, there are no modifiers to worry about, effects that delay an individual's order in the sequence still has the same effect, and -- I suspect -- the idea of counting backwards from 10 to 1 has the psychological effect of feeling like a timer, which speeds everyone up during combat, rather than slowing them down to consider a myriad of strategic maneuvers.

This may not work for all groups, but it's a fun way to shake things up without gutting any rules mechanics in a serious way.

Campaign Scribe/Record Keeper

The Timekeeper or another player may take on a more involved role as the party's scribe, recording not just the time and perhaps a quick reference of major events, but actually taking down the minutes of a game session, or writing in-character journals between game sessions on a blog or forum for your adventures, as we discussed earlier.

This tool syncs up extremely well in a campaign where exploring the world is important to the NPCs as well as the players. Journal entries of some sort, or even an index card of just a short re-telling of events with maybe a thematic title could represent in-game documents that can be bought and sold, providing the characters with a source of income, glory, and renown for undertaking the adventures that the hexcrawl campaign offers them.

To spread the workload out a bit, DMs or players (such as the caller) can make sure to write long-term or short-term goals down as "Quest Cards" with a short description of the goal, and maybe some notes about the rewards (whether it's gold pieces, material items, or XP points; depends on how immersive the group cares to be). Then, the timekeeper (or whomever) organizes the cards or uses them as reminders when crafting a journal or blog post about the events. Keying these cards to areas of the mapper's campaign map or dungeon map might be getting a bit involved, but in some groups, that's exactly the sort of detail that will organize things between sessions and make referencing earlier events at a later date far easier.

Tools of the Trade

Work with whatever covers the period(s) of time tracked, from 3x5 index cards to track encounter rounds or days of travel, to a campaign calendar that shows an entire month at a glance. A real-world calendar works fine in most cases, but campaign world-specific ones exist (there's a Calendar of Harptos available for the Forgotten Realms setting as I mentioned earlier from yours truly!). Graph paper might also be useful for ticking down the rounds or hours in a session, and you can probably swipe a few sheets from your resident mapper.

MONTH: _____ Season: _____

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30

Festival week: _____

Quest cards

Quest name

Rewards

Location

Quest-giver

Description

Quest name

Rewards

Location

Quest-giver

Description

5. The Rules Coordinator

The "Rules Lawyer" is the dreaded term for a player (or some types of DMs) that knows the game system backwards and forwards, calling out errors or inconsistencies. The truly worst case scenario is the person that thinks they know the rules, but in truth reinterprets them to take advantage of them, or simply has an honest brain-fart and forgets some corollary or conflicting exceptions when citing a rule in their favor. But this is an extreme interpretation of a certain type of person, and the fact is that games do have rules for a reason, so why not have someone on hand whose job it is to reference them (physically or from memory) when something crops up that seems contradictory, incomplete, or simply in need of clarity?

The rules coordinator might be the only player at the table allowed to delve into the books to find a ruling (that's one strict DM's table!), or more likely, is just the person who has a good memory for game mechanics or a great mental index of how the books are laid out. While the DM maintains final authority to make a call and move things along, the rules coordinator is there to reference rule specifics at the drop of a hat, and to possibly begin the (hopefully democratic) process of ensuring rules calls are made fairly.

The rules coordinator role combines well with the caller, especially in a Co-Dungeon Master setup. The same goes for the timekeeper, especially if they are the one running initiative order and similar mechanics-related things like spell and effect durations. For experienced groups that don't do a lot of general rule referencing, this role can be ignored or can be secondary to the mapper (knowing the duration of light sources is a rule, right?) or quartermaster (encumbrance is an important rule, right?).

Tools of the Trade

If it was just as easy as cracking open the book to the right page, then the tools would seem pretty obvious for a rules coordinator, but that's not always the case. Some books don't have a comprehensive table of contents or index, so it behooves the rules coordinator to seek out, photocopy, or create cheat sheets, customized indexes, combined indexes from multiple books, and other means of making rules-referencing as fast and accurate as possible. A quick search online calls up lots of especially comprehensive indexes for the D&D Player's Handbook and Dungeon Master's Guide, as well as indexes on Dungeon Masters Guild specific to Variant Rules and Random Tables. (I made that! Go buy it now.)

Similarly, player-centric cheat sheets and Dungeon Master Screens can prove to be useful aids in providing rules references in a clearly laid out fashion, and/or page references to more detailed discussion of the particulars of certain rules. Often referenced are conditions, combat maneuvers, and spell effects, but keep in mind that spells and magic items are often very character-specific, and thus it's best if the player in question has access to the rules they need; there are Spellbook Cards for each of the spellcasting classes for precisely this reason.

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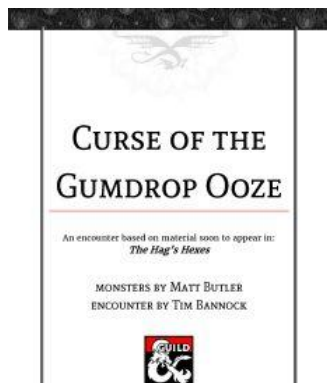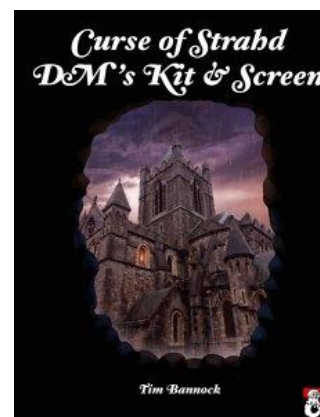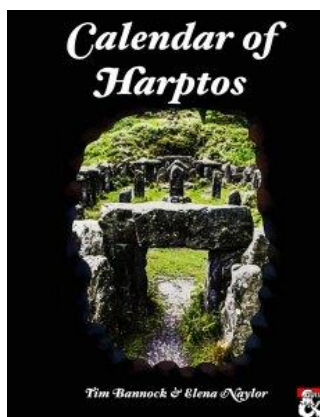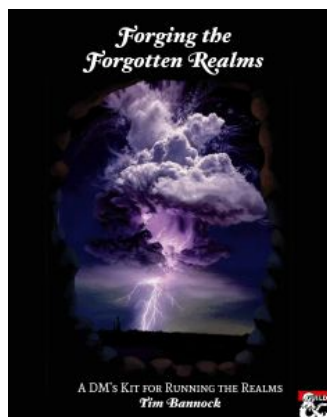
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