

Vanity Frankenstein 5E Intro Questions

What is “Vanity Frankenstein 5e?”

It is my customized house-ruled homebrewed ruleset that I plan to institute when my current 5E D&D campaigns are over.

Why Frankenstein?

“Frankenstein” because this ruleset sews together rules from a variety of editions of D&D and D&D inspired fantasy tabletop roleplaying games, like B/X, AD&D 2E, D&D 3E, 4E, 5E and the latest 2024 (non)-edition, along with Dungeon Crawl Classics, Tales from the Valiant, and Level Up Advanced 5E (A5E).

Why Vanity?

“Vanity” because it’s a vanity project. Why else but for my own hubris would I undertake such an enormous task when most of the people I play D&D with would be happy to play with whatever rules? It is vanity that makes me build my own hodge-podge game rather than find the one that is closest to my ideal vision and take it for what it is. Still, I wouldn’t do it, if I didn’t find it fun.

Why 5E?

I like a lot of elements of modern D&D design. It strikes me as both detailed enough to build a good game framework, while capacious enough to allow for house ruling, homebrewing, and off-the-cuff rulings for edge cases. Furthermore, it is the ruleset that most of the folks I play with (and likely will ever play with at this point) are most familiar with, so using it as a base for my changes makes sense to me.

When I adopted the 5E D&D rules as my go to D&D ruleset in 2019, I was coming out of a substantial break playing or running D&D after 16 years playing and running in a highly house-ruled version of 3E. I decided to run 5E as close to as written as I could stand and still run my style of game. But as time went on, while I enjoyed the core mechanical approach to the game, the rules were not reflecting the kind of heroic fantasy I prefer. I hesitate to use the words “dark” and “gritty.” I think “grounded” is more accurate. I want a D&D ruleset where options reflect the setting, not a generic fantasy superhero milieu.

What’s the most notable difference between 5E Vanity Frankenstein and core 5E?

There are only 10 levels. We never get to play much beyond 10th level, where the complexity of gameplay can become untenable, so why not squeeze some of the cool stuff from levels 11 to 20 into the first 10 levels, cut the fat from the classes and go for it. The irony of this, however, is that while the ultimate goal is a more grounded game, in some ways Vanity Frankenstein characters are more powerful than their D&D5E counterparts, in that they get access to versions of powers usually not gained until they hit their teens in terms of level. The proficiency bonus progression is also a little faster, but the XP chart slows down progression.

Experience Points	Level	Proficiency Bonus
0	1	+2
600	2	+2
1800	3	+2
4500	4	+3
9000	5	+3
22000	6	+3
36000	7	+4
51000	8	+4
74000	9	+4
100000	10	+5

Anything else?

Well, there are a lot of other differences of varying degrees, but if I had to choose a second notable difference it would be the different kinds of potential bonus dice that go along with (mostly) d20 rolls. Hero dice, bardic inspiration, and expertise dice can all modify a die roll, and when multiple dice apply to the same roll, they stack via moving up the dice chain, an idea modified from Dungeon Crawl Classics. This means we might use some funky dice. 1d2→1d3→1d4→1d6→1d8→1d10→1d12→1d14→1d16→1d20→1d24→1d30

How are ability scores different?

5E Vanity Frankenstein uses the same six stats we are used to, but starting characters cannot have ability scores above 18. At 8th level this maximum increases to 20. Starting ability score increases are not tied to your choice of People or background.

How are armor and weapon proficiencies different?

Armor proficiencies aren't different (though there are some more penalties to some skills while wearing medium or heavy armor), but weapons are substantially different.

Turning back to older editions, I'm bringing back weapon proficiency slots (kinda). Characters must be proficient in a weapon to use it without penalty (Disadvantage). But being proficient grants no bonus. As you advance in level, depending on your class or subclass, you get more proficiencies to spend. You can use them to learn new weapons, specialize in a weapon in which you are already proficient (which allows you to add your proficiency bonus to both attack and damage), and if you are a martial class (or a couple of other subclasses) and specialized in a weapon, you can spend a weapon proficiency slot to unlock a weapon's mastery feature, like Graze (which lets you still do a little damage on a miss) or Vex (giving your opponent Disadvantage for their next attack). Player characters now know how to use fewer weapons. The martial classes (berserker, fighter, paladin, ranger) have a significant advantage over arcane spellcasters (mage, warlock) in fighting with weapons, with bards, clerics, druids, and rogues landing somewhere in the middle.

How are skills different?

In general, skills still work much as they do in D&D 5E, except that we're adding a couple of new skills from Level Up Advanced 5e (culture and engineering) and the concept of skill specialization, which grants an "expertise die" to a specific instance of a skill's use if you are proficient in the base skill. For example, a rogue who is proficient in Perception might have a skill specialization in Listening, adding the expertise die (typically a +1d4) to Perception checks involving hearing. All characters begin with one skill specialization, but acquire more through backgrounds, class/subclass advancement, and feats.

What's a Berserker?

Berserkers are just what we used to call "barbarians," but rather than tie the class's fantasy to a cultural ideal, I prefer to have their core feature—raging—serve as the foundation for different ideas of what a "warrior that goes berserk" might look like. While some berserker subclasses might still be more appropriate to so-called "wild people" living on the borderlands, other traditions both cultural and military also offer ways to approach this fantasy archetype. For example, the Vanguard subclass are berserkers trained as shock troops that make up the front wedge of an advancing army. The dwarven Battlerager would be another version.

What happened to wizards and sorcerers?

Wizards and sorcerers are now subclasses of the mage, joined by a new subclass called the elementalist. Mages are people who have a bit of innate magic they have developed through practice and instruction, but make a decision about how to further their arcane abilities when they reach 3rd level. Wizards focus on the study of old tomes and forms. They found schools and are rigid in their focus. Sorcerers, on the other hand, build on their innate magic in order to work on shaping the raw magical energies that fuel their spells, leading to occasional unpredictable results (another name for sorcerers are wild mages). And elementalists study ancient runes designed around manipulating the basic building blocks of reality using the four classical elements (air, fire, earth, water) and the ways they interact.

How are clerics different? Paladins?

Clerics are closely tied to the setting via having to choose one of the 13 Gods worshiped in Makrinos and beyond to venerate and proselytize about. Paladins also choose a god or spiritual patron through which they make their foundational oath. In addition to their domain choice, a cleric's choice of specific god also gives

them a unique ability, and your choice of god determines which domains (i.e. subclasses) are available to you. For example, a cleric of Nyra, Goddess of War & Medicine, has access to either the Life Domain or the War Domain. Finally, cleric spells lists are determined by chosen god.

Are you still banning warlocks?

No, but... Warlocks have been substantially changed for the Makrinos setting, looking more like a variation of the Witch class I used for my old Aquerra 3E games. Warlocks serve as the arcane side of the coin from clerics. If clerics gain their powers through the divine devotion to a god and their servants, warlocks gain their powers through an oral tradition of arcane secrets shared among their kind and passed down from otherworldly patrons, some of which are associated with the 13 Gods, but most of which come from the ranks of the so-called "Under Gods," which includes a bevy of demons, devils, and primal bestial forces. They get no armor proficiency and have a poor choice of weapons. Eldritch Blast has been renamed "Eldritch Force" and works differently.

Are rangers better?

I hope so but we'll only know by playing them. They will be a purely martial class, with spellcasting removed from the base class and only available with one of the subclasses—how A5E handles it—that way you can play a straight up wilderness warrior without having to worry about spellcasting, unless you really want to.

Any changes to the magic system?

Well, since level advancement is capped at 10th level, there will be no way to gain spells above 5th level as part of typical spellcasting advancement. Instead, some capstone spellcaster abilities such as the mages' "Old Magic" and clerics' god-granted "Quest Spells," along with some one-off magical items (like scrolls) will create some limited opportunities for higher level spells. Of course, some very dangerous monsters, like an ancient lich, might still have access to some of those upper tier spells.

More relevant to play at every level, cantrips will no longer be an infinite resource. Instead, when a spellcaster casts a cantrip, they must roll a spellcheck to see if they can maintain access to that magical source, or if a long rest is needed to restore it. So, it might be possible to cast a cantrip a dozen times in a day, but it is also likely that eventually your luck will run out and you'll have to find a different way forward. This is both to prevent spell "spamming" and to keep some degree of mystery and unpredictability to magic. And if you ever want to make sure you maintain access to a cantrip you can always sacrifice a spell slot to cast it.

Lastly, the vast majority of spells will be tweaked in some way. Some will have minor details changed—*goodberry* grants a random number of berries and only gives one meal's worth of sustenance each, not a whole day's—others, might be more significantly changed—*heat metal* needs a saving throw—still others completely rewritten, and a handful removed altogether. Healing spells will be reworked to include a chance to spend Hit Dice.

Anything else worth mentioning?

I like D&D 2024's simplified exhaustion rules and want to use them right away. I also want to try a simplified encumbrance system based on Shadowdark's.

Are all these changes set in stone?

No. While some of these changes—like cantrip spellchecks—feel like non-negotiables, even those are open to having the actual implementation changed. The best playtesting is actual play. So, I like for the group to approach a campaign with a willingness to change aspects of characters and the rules after the fact if something ends up being woefully under- or overpowered, or interferes with fun at the table.

What's the plan for developing these rules?

I already have a lot of it done. I have written all the base classes and am in the process of designing three subclasses for each class (save for clerics who have seven to match the variety of gods and their portfolios). I recently rewrote every single feat to make them narrower, less powerful, and more specific. I am working on

rewriting spells intermittently as they come up. I started up a Discord server for discussing rules changes and some friends and I will be converting some existing 5E characters to these rules just to see how they differ, by running some combats based on encounters from adventures we've already gone through with the original version of the characters. I also hope to design a character sheet soon, since I find a good character sheet does a lot of the heavy lifting in normalizing house rules and helping folks "visualize" what their character is capable of.

What are you going to do with these rules?

Play D&D with them. I am not gonna sell them and don't have plans to share them outside of my circle of friends. Though I do plan to eventually create a wiki for the rules so my players, especially those with whom I play remotely, will have easy access to them.