

PATHFINDER 2E VS D&D 5E



DND DICE ROLLER

A practical comparison of Pathfinder 2e and D&D 5E, focused on rules complexity, combat, character building, GM workload, and which game fits your table best.

PATHFINDER 2E VS D&D 5E

PATHFINDER 2E AND D&D 5E ARE CLOSE ENOUGH TO attract the same players, but different enough that a group can strongly prefer one over the other.

Both are fantasy tabletop roleplaying games. Both use d20 rolls. Both support heroic adventuring, tactical combat, spellcasting, monsters, treasure, character classes, and long campaigns.

But they do not feel the same at the table.

D&D 5E is usually easier to start, easier to improvise, and more familiar to new players. Pathfinder 2e is more structured, more tactical, and more precise. Neither game is automatically better. They solve different problems.

This guide compares them in practical terms: how they play, how hard they are to learn, what kind of group each one suits, and what trade-offs you should expect.

THE SHORT ANSWER

Choose D&D 5E if your group wants:

- A familiar fantasy RPG with a huge player base.
- Faster onboarding for new players.
- A rules-light to rules-medium feel.
- More room for DM rulings and table improvisation.
- A system where cinematic flow often matters more than tactical precision.

Choose Pathfinder 2e if your group wants:

- More tactical combat.
- More character-building choices.
- Tighter math and encounter balance.
- More detailed rules support.
- A game where teamwork and action efficiency matter every round.

If your table likes loose rulings, D&D 5E is probably easier.

If your table likes meaningful tactical choices and clear mechanical structure, Pathfinder 2e may fit better.

CORE DICE SYSTEM

Both games use the d20 as the main die.

In D&D 5E, the usual structure is:

d20 + ability modifier + proficiency if applicable

You compare the result to a Difficulty Class, Armour Class, or saving throw target.

Pathfinder 2e also uses a d20, but the numbers scale differently. Characters add level-based proficiency, ability modifiers, item bonuses, and other typed bonuses or penalties.

The result is that Pathfinder 2e tends to feel more mathematically structured. A small bonus can matter a lot because of how critical success and critical failure work.

ADVANTAGE VS BONUSES

D&D 5E leans heavily on advantage and disadvantage.

If you have advantage, roll two d20s and take the higher result. If you have disadvantage, roll two d20s and take the lower result.

This is quick and easy to understand. It also avoids stacking too many small modifiers.

Pathfinder 2e uses more direct modifiers, such as circumstance bonuses, status bonuses, item bonuses, and penalties. These bonus types matter because some stack and some do not.

That sounds fussier, and sometimes it is. The benefit is precision. Pathfinder can represent small tactical differences more clearly than D&D 5E usually does.

SUCCESS IS DIFFERENT IN PATHFINDER 2E

One of Pathfinder 2e's biggest differences is its four-degree success system:

- Critical success
- Success
- Failure
- Critical failure

In many cases, beating the DC by 10 or more is a critical success. Failing by 10 or more is a critical failure.

This changes the entire feel of the game.

In D&D 5E, a roll often asks a binary question: did you pass or fail?

In Pathfinder 2e, the question is often: how well did you do?

That creates more texture. A spell, skill action, or saving throw might produce four different outcomes instead of two. It also means a +1 bonus can be more valuable than it looks, because it might not only turn a failure into a success. It might turn a success into a critical success.

COMBAT ACTION ECONOMY

D&D 5E uses several action types:

- Action
- Bonus action
- Movement
- Reaction
- Sometimes free interactions or special cases

This works well, but it can be awkward for new players. They often ask whether something is an action, bonus action, object interaction, or part of movement.

Pathfinder 2e uses a three-action economy.

On your turn, you usually get three actions and one reaction. Many things cost one action. Some activities cost two or three actions. Movement, attacks, drawing items, raising a shield, casting many spells, and special abilities all fit into that structure.

This is one of Pathfinder 2e's strongest features.

It gives players clear tactical choices:

- Move, attack, raise shield.
- Attack, attack, step back.
- Cast a two-action spell, then move.
- Demoralize, strike, move.
- Draw a potion, drink it, take cover.

The system makes every turn feel like a small resource puzzle.

CHARACTER CREATION

D&D 5E character creation is usually faster.

You choose a species or ancestry, class, background, ability scores, equipment, spells if needed, and a few other details. The number of choices depends heavily on class. A champion fighter is simple. A wizard is more involved.

Pathfinder 2e character creation has more moving parts.

You choose ancestry, heritage, background, class, feats, skills, ability boosts, and often more detailed options as you level. Pathfinder characters gain feats regularly, and those feats shape what the character can do.

This is excellent for players who love building characters.

It can be tiring for players who just want to sit down and play.

CHARACTER CUSTOMISATION

D&D 5E gives you meaningful character identity, but many choices are broad. Two characters of the same class can feel very different through subclass, spell selection, feats, equipment, and roleplay, but the mechanical branching is moderate.

Pathfinder 2e offers more mechanical customisation. It gives players lots of small decisions over time. Ancestry feats, class feats, skill feats, general feats, and archetypes allow very specific builds.

This is a strength if your players enjoy mechanical identity.

It is a weakness if your players freeze when faced with too many options.

ENCOUNTER BALANCE

D&D 5E encounter balance is loose.

Challenge Rating can help, but many DMs learn that encounter difficulty depends heavily on party composition, magic items, rests, terrain, player skill, and action economy. A supposedly deadly encounter might collapse quickly. A moderate encounter might become dangerous because of a few bad rolls or an unexpected monster ability.

Pathfinder 2e encounter balance is much tighter.

Because the math is more structured, encounter-building guidance tends to be more reliable. Level differences matter. Monster numbers matter. Small bonuses matter.

For DMs who want predictable encounter design, Pathfinder 2e has an advantage.

For DMs who prefer loose, cinematic, adjustable encounters, D&D 5E may feel more forgiving.

RULES COMPLEXITY

D&D 5E is simpler, but not always simple.

It has fewer moving parts than Pathfinder 2e, but it still contains plenty of exceptions, spell interactions, class features, conditions, and edge cases. New players can learn the basics quickly, but rules debates still happen.

Pathfinder 2e is more complex upfront.

The trade-off is that more situations have a written answer. The system tries to give the GM tools for common cases instead of leaving everything to judgement.

This can reduce table arguments if everyone is willing to learn the system.

It can increase table friction if players do not want to track details.

GM WORKLOAD

D&D 5E can be easier to run casually, especially if the DM is comfortable improvising.

The DM can make rulings quickly, adjust monsters, ignore some details, and keep the story moving. That flexibility is one reason 5E is popular.

The downside is that the DM often carries more invisible workload. When the rules are loose, the DM must decide more things.

Pathfinder 2e asks the GM to understand more rules, but it also gives more structure. Encounter math, conditions, actions, treasure, DCs, and monster design have clearer support.

The result is a different kind of workload:

- D&D 5E asks for more judgement calls.
- Pathfinder 2e asks for more rules fluency.

Neither is effortless. They are demanding in different ways.

TACTICAL DEPTH

Pathfinder 2e is generally more tactical.

Positioning matters. Conditions matter. Teamwork matters. A +1 bonus matters. Choosing whether to attack again, raise a shield, move, demoralize, trip, recall knowledge, or cast a spell can matter a lot.

D&D 5E can absolutely be tactical, especially with a strong DM and engaged players. But the system is more tolerant of straightforward play. Many characters can stand in place and use their best action repeatedly and still contribute.

In Pathfinder 2e, lazy tactics are punished more often. That can be exciting or exhausting, depending on the group.

POWER CURVE AND BALANCE

D&D 5E has a looser power curve. Some spells, subclasses, feats, and multiclass combinations can outperform others by a large margin. Many tables are fine with that. Some even enjoy the chaos.

Pathfinder 2e is more carefully balanced. It usually keeps characters closer together mechanically. Optimisation still exists, but the system is less likely to let one build completely dominate the table.

Players who enjoy wild power spikes may prefer D&D 5E.

Players who want fairer tactical balance may prefer Pathfinder 2e.

LEARNING CURVE

D&D 5E is easier to introduce.

Most new players can understand this quickly:

“Roll a d20, add a number, try to beat the target.”

Pathfinder 2e requires more explanation:

“You have three actions, your bonuses have types, your proficiency scales, success has four degrees, and many abilities have specific traits.”

That does not mean Pathfinder 2e is impossibly hard. It means the first few sessions ask more from the group.

For a casual table with inconsistent attendance, D&D 5E is usually easier.

For a committed table that enjoys learning systems, Pathfinder 2e can be deeply rewarding.

PUBLISHED SUPPORT AND COMMUNITY

D&D 5E has enormous cultural reach. It is easy to find players, videos, streams, third-party adventures, dice tools, character sheets, and advice. Many people who have never played a tabletop RPG have still heard of D&D.

Pathfinder 2e has a smaller but dedicated community. It also benefits from strong rules accessibility and a player base that often enjoys system mastery.

If your main problem is finding people to play with, D&D 5E has the advantage.

If your main problem is finding a system with more tactical structure, Pathfinder 2e deserves serious consideration.

WHICH GAME IS BETTER FOR BEGINNERS?

For most complete beginners, D&D 5E is easier.

It is not because beginners are incapable of learning Pathfinder 2e. It is because D&D 5E demands fewer mechanical decisions at the start and has more familiar support material.

However, Pathfinder 2e can be excellent for beginners if the whole table is learning together and the GM is prepared. Some new players actually prefer having clearer rules because they do not have to guess what is possible.

The real question is not “which game is beginner friendly?”

The better question is:

“What kind of beginner are we talking about?”

A casual beginner may prefer D&D 5E.

A board game or strategy game player may love Pathfinder 2e.

WHICH GAME IS BETTER FOR ROLEPLAY?

Neither game owns roleplay.

A roleplay-heavy group can have a brilliant campaign in D&D 5E or Pathfinder 2e.

D&D 5E may feel more open because it leaves more room for loose rulings and cinematic improvisation.

Pathfinder 2e may feel more grounded because character options, skills, and actions define what characters can do in clearer terms.

Roleplay depends more on the table than the system. The system mostly changes how much mechanical structure surrounds that roleplay.

WHICH GAME SHOULD YOUR GROUP CHOOSE?

Here is the practical answer:

Your group wants...	Better fit
Fast onboarding	D&D 5E
More tactical combat	Pathfinder 2e
Huge community and name recognition	D&D 5E
Tighter encounter math	Pathfinder 2e
More mechanical character choices	Pathfinder 2e
Easier casual play	D&D 5E
More rules support	Pathfinder 2e
More DM flexibility	D&D 5E
More balanced character options	Pathfinder 2e
A lighter rules burden	D&D 5E

FINAL VERDICT

D&D 5E is the better choice for many groups because it is accessible, flexible, familiar, and easy to get onto the table.

Pathfinder 2e is the better choice for groups that want deeper tactical play, stronger encounter balance, more character options, and a rules system that answers more questions directly.

If your group likes story-first play with loose rulings, start with D&D 5E.

If your group likes tactical combat, careful builds, and clear mechanics, try Pathfinder 2e.

The best system is not the one with the loudest fans. It is the one your table will actually enjoy playing every week.



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