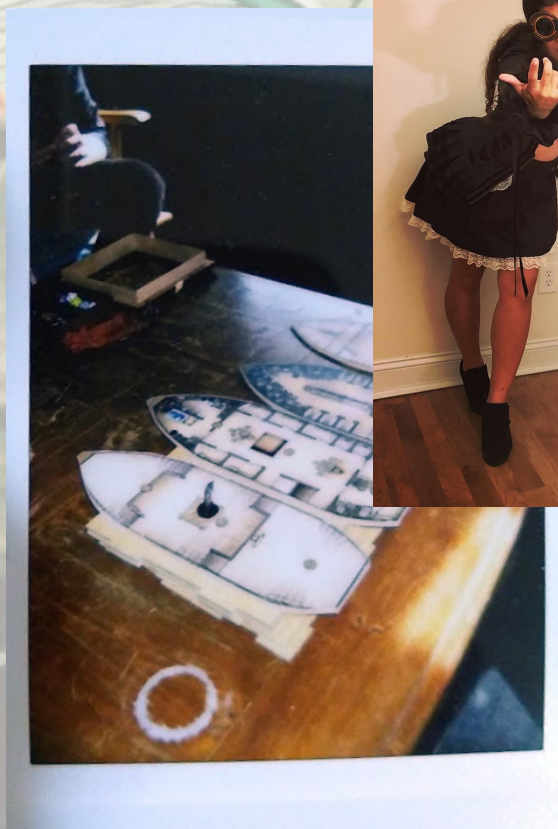
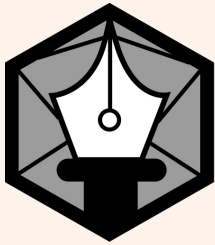


JOD4HAP

The Journal of Dungeoneering for Hip and Attractive Professionals



Issue 1



The Journal of Dungeoneering for Hip and Attractive Professionals

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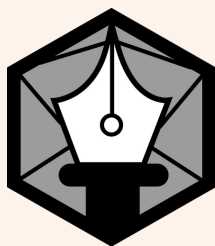


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A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS UPON THE PUBLICATION OF OUR FIRST ISSUE

One evening during GenCon 2019, Liz and Alex were drinking a beer at a roadside dive somewhere by Eagle Creek or Brownsburg, IN (not sure which, but there were no sidewalks). Liz was explaining the charm and appeal of The Adventure Zone podcast, and it struck Alex that this conversation was not particularly far removed from the sorts of discussions we'd have talking shop about literature or editing.

Since grad school, we had been kicking ideas back and forth for a new collaborative project. At one point we landed on launching a sci-fi/fantasy imprint, but that idea didn't catch us. At some point towards the end of the year, Alex was flipping between *Taco Bell Quarterly*, *Teen Vogue*, and a stack of early *Dungeon* magazines, and that GenCon conversation came back to mind. What if there was a place we could have the same kind of invested, earnest, and studious conversations as we were trained to have in literature and craft, but applied to Tabletop Role Playing Games? What if we could platform some of the people who were already modeling that kind of intellectual work? And what if we could do it in a way that reclaimed Young Professional culture from the dull-eyed capitalists who barely appreciate the aesthetic in the first place?

This is how The Journal of Dungeoneering for Hip and Attractive Professionals came to be. And while it has been a rough year in the making, we're proud to bring you the conversations, art, and experiences we've collected. Imagine it as a conversation between friends at a smoky Indiana dive bar. Imagine it as something your GM would cook up to add flavor to your weekly play session.

Because you're hip, you're attractive, and you're a **professional**. This is our dungeoneering manual. We want to hear from you, so send us an email at editors.jod4hap@protonmail.com and look out for our next call for papers. Let's get adventuring. 

Advice from Felix

*You can send letters to Felix
the Flumph at*

editors.jod4hap@protonmail.com.

*Use “Dear Felix” in the subject
line. Ask anything you like,
but this column will focus on
resolving awkward situations
around the gaming table.*



**Felix the Flumph,
CR1 Aberration**

Introducing: Me, Felix!

Oh my gosh, hi!

I'm Felix, the flumph.

I traveled here from a distant galaxy with dire warnings about the elder gods, but no one liked hearing about that, so now I give advice for how to make your gaming table more fun and inclusive!

Okay, a little bit about me. I have been a gamer ever since I was larvae in the pressurized core of a gas giant. My brood and I were raised on AD&D, Heroquest, and V:tM (the “new WoD” edition, not Mind’s Eye lol). Even though my warnings about evils that should not be go unheeded, people tend to trust my instincts about TTRPGs.

So this column will be a home for my thoughts, feelings, and experience with TTRPG. I'm so happy to be here!

Really, though, let me know if you know anyone who can do something about the elder gods. It's, like, gonna be an issue. 

Developing Therapeutic Applications of Tabletop RPGs

An Interview with Jack Berkenstock Jr., MHS (human investigator 8th)
Content Warnings: Sexual abuse (mention, non-graphic)

Elizabeth Parsons: *Do you have a favorite type of NPC?*

JB: I would probably have to say “foppish rogue.” It’s gone through many iterations, but they’re usually like, Poncho Villa, a joke-y character. For a while I actually patterned my vocal styling after the king prawn shrimp from the muppets, all these weird things based on other pop culture stuff. Foppish rogue—not as good as he thinks he is with the ladies, but has some clutch rolls here and there.

Alex G. Friedman: *I think our optimal reader would be considered a foppish rogue.*

EP: *This is, after all, for hip and attractive professionals!*

AF: *How did you get started playing games and what keeps you coming back?*



JB: I have been playing RPGs since I was twelve. It all kind of started, honestly, just courtesy of the “Satanic Panic” and the fact that I was growing up right in the middle of all of that. Loving fantasy and sci-fi and all kinds of different stuff, I discovered Dungeons and Dragons by accident because a couple of friends had it.

I was a very shy kid. I wasn’t as “out there” as I put myself out these days. It’s always been a dream of mine to be a published fiction author. So that’s what started my love of RPGs. I could tell these stories. That’s probably why I’m more of a GM than a player. I love creating these plotlines and seeing where they’re going to go. Like: Here is this cool setting and a start, and there are all these people around the table, where are they gonna take it and how can I keep up?

Not only do I have board games on my shelf that I’ve played or have yet to play, but I love reading about new role playing systems and learning about different settings and different mechanics, because I love finding out different ways to tell a story, especially if a game lends itself to different storytelling. I love playing characters and using voices and coming up with plotlines and dramatic moments.





Alex: Let's talk about the book! What drew you to using TTRPGs in conjunction with traditional methods of therapy?

JB: I'll try to give you an abridged version. It's a story I tell often.

It started out of the nonprofit The Bodhana Group, which we started in 2009. Just like any nonprofit, we became in need of funds. We intended to be a training company. Most of my history is from working with juveniles and pre-adolescent males in residential settings—either victims or perpetrators of sexual abuse. We started Bodhana figuring we could train people in things like compassion fatigue, help people work with that very challenging population and also maybe talk to parents.

We decided to do a fundraiser. That's when we started "Save Against Fear." It's an annual three-day gaming convention we run in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. It's our main platform for talking about the mission. This year, we had about 30 professionals attend from across the United States.

Gaming is therapeutic no matter how you slice it.

EP: There are a lot of different types of games to play now. I know of a few of them. We have Monster of the Week, and Pathfinder, and D&D, and I recently listened to a podcast where they played a game called "Oh, Dang! Bigfoot stole my car with my friend's birthday present inside!"—definitely a weird game.

How do you see gaming evolving today?

JB: Even way back then, there were different systems. Traveler, Gamma World, Call of Cthulu were all out in the late 70s, early 80s. There was also one called Stormbringer that was based on the fiction of Michael Moorcock. There have always been a ton of different RPGs. Pretty early on, fantasy wasn't the only bag. What I've seen in terms of where gaming has gone and how it has changed... I think the finesse of gaming has gotten a little bit different, especially in recent years. You're seeing a lot more minimalist gaming systems. Back in the day, it was like, "Hey bro, you like charts?" But now what we're seeing is a lot more narratively drawn and driven games, so it's more about interpretation of die roll as opposed to, like, simple pass/fail mechanics.



Save Against Fear got us in contact with Rich Thomas, who was previously the creative director of White Wolf. He is now the CEO of Onyx Path Publishing, which puts out Scarred Lands, Pugmire, Cavaliers of Mars, and Worlds of Darkness Anniversary Editions. Rich was sharing with us how he had gotten so many letters over the years from people who had been working through personal trauma through fighting monsters in a game or giving them a sense of agency through being able to command their character in a game. When Rich had said that to us, we thought, “Hold on, guys, what do we remember about when we ran D&D on the unit?” And we started talking about some of the minor behavioral things, like: “Don’t blow it, you’re our cleric, we need you to show up on Saturday for the big dungeon run.”

It started out fairly pedestrian in terms of treatment goals. Then we kind of turned the lens on ourselves and we started examining our own gamer history. When I was twelve and was first playing all these stories—what was I doing? What was I working on? What characters did I play, either when my parents were going through their divorce and I was kind of this pushed-to-the-side kid, or when I was getting a little bit older and was now in college and meeting new people? Were there differences, not only in what I played, but in the way I played, that I could now see through the lens of a trained, experienced therapist—and it turned out, we had all gotten benefit. I had used this to be more socially outgoing and develop confidence in myself, because a lot of bad things were going on in my life at that time.

We then kind of took that self-understanding and put the clinical filter on top of it. What if a person who was not only a trained therapist, but also who was a skilled Game Master... What if we could meld those two worlds and apply some intentionality to the creation of characters, of plotlines and milleus... What if we build the world to tell a certain story, and that story was emotionally resonant with someone? You’re setting up this simulation where you can practice any number of skills through the use of the narrative and the flow of the gameplay—and it’s all about toggling the switches of the game appropriately to what the person needs to work on or what they want to work on and kind of where they’re at in their development. So that’s the way the model works and the way we arrived there through this process of examination and evaluation.



AF: How about the process you went through in defining those therapeutic benefits?

JB: Bodhana doesn’t just use tabletop RPG—we use tabletop board games as well. Initially, we had chosen the name ‘Bodhana’ because it meant ‘leading to an awakening or an understanding’—a Sanskrit word. We tried to come at mental health care from a different perspective that had concepts from Buddhist psychology and dialectical behavior therapy.

So what can you get out of this? Naturally, we started with what we call ‘the pedestrian benefits.’ Gaming is therapeutic no matter how you slice it. But ‘therapeutic’ doesn’t mean ‘therapy.’ We started to examine: What do you get out of playing with your regular gaming group? Well, low-hanging fruit, there: social skills. You’re around a table with a bunch of other people, you’re playing and having time and relaxing. It’s a dice-driven version of going to the bar.

Then, creativity and expression—I know people who have drawn their characters, I know bards who have learned to play music, people who have drawn the items their characters have, people who have dressed in character and made props, the performance aspect of it.

It could teach resilience, or the ability to deal with failure or adverse conditions, which is very therapeutic. What can we do with the concept of the game? Well, everyone knows dice rolls are not always your friend, so could that be therapeutic? Stuff doesn’t always go the way that you want it to.

We looked at our own hobby and started identifying core aspects. Which is why in our first volume of *Wizards, Warriors and Wellness*, there are seven main heroes, and then there’s one who’s sort of mentioned, Hawk.

We’re currently at work on a source book that’s gonna contain therapeutic adventure hooks. Each of those characters has a fully realized world that represents some of the struggles of what gaming can offer to a person. So, Rowe the dwarf, for example, who is the avatar of resilience, he comes from a very harsh world. There are constant storms, not a lot of crops, not a lot of food—so it’s all about Rowe learning to thrive in an adverse climate. Everybody kind of has a tough go at it. We felt that if we could set stories in those worlds, which is what this project is, you can use it with any game system.

We looked at our own hobby and started identifying core aspects.

AF: I found the section on ‘Initiative’ to be really interesting. Would you speak on how you relate initiative in Pathfinder and D&D with willingness to take risk in real life?

JB: Initiative is several different things. One, we love initiative because it helps people learn to take their turn—because sometimes you can’t just rush in. But we also looked at the fact that initiative is equivalent to ‘drive’ or ‘interest.’ When you have initiative, you have the drive or the will to do something. In a lot of game situations, you can do things that you may not have the opportunity to do in real life. In some cases, like time travel or something like that, you can obviously try things that you would never get the chance to do. But it’s also about taking risks. Part of life is developing the confidence to know that taking a risk doesn’t mean you’re throwing everything away.



Some of the kids we work with have some of those social challenges. They're not the most popular kids, and the kids that do hang out with them are not necessarily the best of role models. We want these kids to develop confidence, and the only way to develop confidence is to take a risk and to learn to weigh out those consequences.

They would ask: "Why would he want to talk to me?"

And I would say, "I don't know, #reasons."

So the concept of initiative is very key, especially if you're talking about someone who doesn't speak up often in order to develop more confidence. The natural way we do this is in the fabric of RPG. Maybe the king doesn't want to talk to the guy who always talks every session; maybe the king wants to talk to your character. They would ask, "Why would he want to talk to me?" And I would say, I don't know, #reasons. Because you're an elf, because you're short, because you have blond hair, because you're tall, because you have a shield. Whatever reason is convenient to the plot. It's the way we institute a certain skill development, which offers that opportunity for someone to take that risk.

AF: You mention in the book that you're writing a manual to use for therapeutic gaming, and it sounds like that's a pretty expansive project. Would you like to tell us about the format that that might take?

JB: We thought it was going to be, you know, one big, old, dusty, cobweb-filled tome, the pages like 28 by 14 or whatever. With *Wizards, Warriors and Wellness*, we're looking to do kind of short bursts, almost booklets if you will, that can be utilized by a therapist or a practitioner based on what they're working with.





Wizards, Warriors and Wellness was originally intended as kind of an initial volume that will be expanded to multiple different volumes that are going to be easily affordable. Let's say we're working with someone with an anxiety disorder, or someone with a depression diagnosis. What are some ways that we can customize the game, skill-develop or develop elements of a storyline that we can put into a world? It will also have some story-starters, like one-shots that would facilitate a little more specialization.

One of the biggest things we're finding, now that we've been doing this pretty solidly for the better part of five or six years, is the question of "why do you think this works" is kind of the "duh" moment. People say that of course [TTRPG as therapy] works. It makes sense. But then they ask: "How do you do it? How do you create a world that exemplifies anxiety to a person?"

Well... Consider this. Maybe everything is very fast-paced in this culture. Maybe people feel rushed. Maybe the adventure is always on a timeline. Maybe the king decrees that 'at this time every day, every hour or every interval, we have to do this certain thing.' If you look at stories, anything from Doctor Who to Star Trek to Star Wars to whatever—there are ways

that show you how this creative thinking can be applied. But what we're finding is for a lot of therapists, that's the real trick: How do you put [therapeutic concepts] in the game?

This is my biggest joke I tell everywhere: "You just slaughtered an entire Orc village. How does it make you feel?"

I love the experience I have working with kids and teens, because man, they'll tune you out quick. But if you're running an adventure that's driven and inspired, and it makes narrative sense—you got 'em. And they'll go along with that narrative. We all know it's for therapy, it's not a secret. But it's not something we have to hit you over the head with, either. I tell you we're going to build the story around what your goals are and what you want to work on. We'll reflect on it occasionally.

It's psychodrama narrative therapy and expressive arts therapy, and there's elements of cognitive behavioral therapy and rational emotive behavioral therapy. The story is what makes it unique, so to us, the focus is the story that drives the process of learning and exploration, investigation, practice, and rehearsal. To us it's more how to apply a certain diagnosis or a certain challenge or certain disorder in a way that makes it narratively interesting, into something that a kid would want to explore.

"You just slaughtered an entire Orc village. How does it make you feel?"



EP: It does sound like, if you'll forgive this terrible joke I'm about to make, instead of the DSM-V, you're creating instead a GM guide for people with therapeutic backgrounds.

JB: We don't use the same adventure twice. We craft every story arc uniquely to the player mix that we have and we make alterations based on player response as well as additions or removals—someone graduates the program or goes on to another form of treatment or whatever.

This is why the first question I ask when other practitioners ask: "So, tell me how you run therapeutic RPG." My answer is always: "I know your CV, your Curriculum Vitae. I need your GV—your Gaming Vitae. Have you ever played an RPG? Before you go to do this, you have to understand what a role-playing game is."

Because that's the meat, that's the heart of it. If you don't understand plot and pacing and character development—if you don't know how to wave that wand, there is no spell. Yes, there's good group methodology and there are techniques, approaches and modalities, but this is an "adjunct" form of treatment. It's based around simple group concepts—forming, norming, storming, performing. All of that stuff is built into this, but the story is where the magic happens.

The Bodhana Group

www.thebodhanagroup.org

Facebook: Bodhana Group

Twitter/Instagram: @thebodhanagroup,
@bodhanajack

EP: What's next for The Bodhana Group?

JB: Of course we're putting the finishing touches on the board game version of *Wizards, Warriors and Wellness* that will talk about how to stylize the way you teach a game and what board games can offer, with examples of good games that kind of highlight certain concepts.

Kids will want to game.

Kids love gaming.

Our eventual goal is we would love to be able to offer this service to kids and teens for free. So our idea is: We have proposals out. We're looking to get our first proposal accepted, which will fund a group of six kids for a year, for less than \$6,000. We want to pay our facilitators, so if we get big investors to participate, they could cover the cost of not only the facilitation, but every kid would get their own book and dice bag.

Another big thing we do is we partner a lot with local game stores and actually run sessions at these shops—in hopes that the kids will then start to develop natural supports for themselves. They can develop their own friends, and have a new language to speak—and that language is RPG.

Eventually we'd like to open our own "YMCA for nerds." A Bodhana Center—a place where we could offer after-school programs and classes and workshops, as well as summer programming, predominantly for at-risk youth. Kids will want to game. Kids love gaming. 



An Incredibly Brave and Necessary Review of Wendy's *Feast of Legends*



Editorial by

ALEX G. FRIEDMAN,
MA, MFA, human rogue 5

One would be right to question whether an in-depth review of *Feast of Legends* is merited over a year after its publication. After all, it was just a marketing and promotional gambit that met middling initial success and was quickly forgotten amid half-hearted cries of 'silence, brand.' But perhaps *Feast* does deserve further examination for a few reasons, the plainest being that it was the first attempt in a long time by a truly mainstream brand to occupy the space and attentions of the TTRPG community.

This represents a formerly unfathomable situation—a major fast food corporation pandering to us. In essence, we have guests. What sort of hosts would we be to ignore this friendly intrusion? What would it say of our manners if we were to deny *Feast of Legends* the sort of deep and substantive review we'd grant to *White Wolf* or *Kobold Press*?

Feast of Legends is a stripped down war-game/lite dungeon dive turn-based TTRPG with a large variety of minigames. The game was designed by

Matt Keck and Tony Marin “and others,” assumedly at VMLY&R (a marketing firm). Most notably, it features a limited selection of artwork by the brilliant and accomplished Alex Lopez (readers might recall Lopez’s work on the Pathfinder: Goblins! comic book covers or his Marvel heroes portraits, more on Mr. Lopez later). It utilizes an event based player character level progression, three main character types divided into 4-5 ‘Orders’, each based off of a Wendy’s menu item. This persistent reference to the Wendy’s menu will become a stifling factor as the included adventure proceeds. Gameplay is simplified to a one-page explanation of combat actions, resting, and extreme roll results. The ‘Adventuring’ section includes a brief explanation of the Game Master’s role and then a couple pages of items. This is followed by a page of “Buffs” and “Debuffs” which has been covered extensively on social media and in other publications. Suffice to say, you ought to skip page 10 of Feast of Legends unless you’re particularly keen on terrible dietary advice. The rest of the rulebook is devoted to pre-filled character sheets (which are appreciated but oddly placed) and the included adventure, “Rise from the Deep Freeze.” Without the included adventure, Feast of Legends weighs in at about 23 pages, pretty standard for an RPG-lite. Notably it lacks any examples of play, but it is fairly obvious that this book is intended for players somewhat familiar with D&D5e and a youth of the game’s minimum recommended age

"In essence, we have guests. What sort of hosts would we be to ignore this friendly intrusion? What would it say of our manners if we were to deny Feast of Legends the sort of deep and substantive review we'd grant to White Wolf or Kobold Press?"

of 13 would have no trouble figuring it out assuming they have watched an RPG stream or two.

Before the book transitions to the much larger adventure section, its major issues start to show. This book is very repetitive. Skills are copy/pasted from one Order to another, largely because many of the Orders are nearly identical for no reason other than to get another menu item referenced in the game. It isn't as though players have expectations for this game—there aren't iconic or literary character classes causing role overlaps similar to, say, Fighter and Ranger. Skills are the only major gameplay differentiation between Orders; characters only get one or two per level (there are only

five levels). Much like the fast food that the Orders are based upon, Orders such as the Dave's Double and the Double Stack are almost completely interchangeable. In one particularly egregious case, the A Quick Bite skill appears in at least four different Orders' skill sets. A Quick Bite is a trash healing cantrip that heals a d4 (almost a total waste considering the characters' 12+1d12/lvl hp pools). It is further replicated by the most common item in the game, the Nugget. Late-night Craving (grants an attack buff at night) is a similarly bad and repetitive skill that appears across three orders. The included adventure includes one mention of nighttime combat in the description for a creature that attacks during a daytime battle. It's unclear why these skills are included at all, if anything they simply plug the holes left by missed character development opportunities. Fresh, Never Frozen is another skill that is repeated

across multiple Orders, however it does serve the mechanical purpose of granting frontline characters resistance to late-game damage dealers. (Be prepared to see "fresh, never frozen" repeated ad nauseam though the rest of the book as the phrase appears at least fifteen times.) Wasted space and repetition aside, is the game system actually fun? Sort of, but not uniquely so. It is roughly as fun as a more forgiving D&D without dynamic battle maps or a proper magic system due to the fact that it essentially is D&D, mechanically speaking. Therefore any added charm in this game would need to come from the fast food cultural references and the Wendy's branding, and this is largely a matter of taste. Suffice to say that I associate Wendy's branding more strongly with the litter choking America's streets than good times or enjoyable food, so that aspect of the game didn't appeal to me personally. "Rise from the Deep Freeze" fills out the rest of Feast of Legends's remaining 72 pages. This 6 chapter adventure includes 12 monsters (along with a handful of leveled-up variants), 3 dungeons, a handful of towns, and several mini-games. "Rise from the Deep Freeze" chronicles the party's quest to stop the Ice Jester from freezing the beef of the nation of Freshtovia. The campaign is set in the realm of Beef's Keep which is populated primarily by parody characters inspired by people from Wendy's marketing and the mascots of competing restaurant chains. For the purposes of this



review, I read the adventure cover-to-cover twice and attempted research on every proper name referenced. Hyper-reliance on implied parody is one of the major ways the material (or lack thereof) in this campaign fails. The majority of characters mentioned have no art and very minimal description associated with them. For example, a midboss named The Grumble appears in the first dungeon. One might assume that The Grumble is supposed to play off of The Grimace, but the beast is neither described nor illustrated. Its stat block is no help either, because the creature is faster than average and uses a tongue attack—not what I think of when I think of the purple McDonald’s mascot.

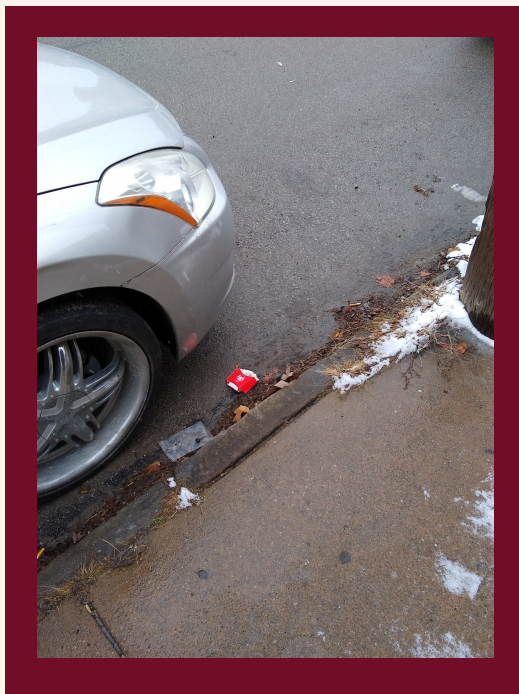
For all the praise that Feast of Legends has gotten for its production value, these are the situations where Alex Lopez’s art is really needed. I wonder what it would have cost VMLY&R to commission further artwork from him to illustrate monsters beyond the two end bosses of the game. As it stands, we’re left with missing or cursory descriptions that obfuscate the point. The Freezer Burn, for example, “strikes with the flat, blunt side of its icy fist” and “bites with jagged, icy teeth” (90). Fair enough, but what is a Freezer Burn? Is it some sort of ice goblin? Or perhaps it is more like a skeleton? No further clues are given. It has blunt sides to its icy fists, though. The Birdie the Early Bird parody monster only succeeds in breaking the game and potentially TPKing a party that has forgotten to pack ranged

combat solutions, the only time in the adventure such weapons are necessary. The creature lacks any jokes or even reference to the Birdie character’s flight cap and scarf.

*"Suffice to say that I
associate Wendy's branding
more strongly with the litter
choking America's streets
than good times or
enjoyable food."*

Most of the game is severely hampered by bland, derivative, and unhelpful prose. The first dungeon of “Rise of the Deep Freeze” combines puzzles lifted from a handful of classic films/literature with cluttered, badly written rooms. Descriptions such as, “The room to the right is small. Entering really doesn’t amount to anything; there are some twigs...,” abound (41). Later in this dungeon, the ‘one-always-lies-the-other-tells-the-truth’ puzzle is reprised in the most cringe inducing way. The Tea are “two women with otherworldly auras”(42). These two otherwise undescribed characters play out the tired logic puzzle by snapping back and forth to each other and finishing each line with, “and that’s the Tea” (43). This sassy Black lady caricature is derived from the ‘clap back’ persona of the official Wendy’s Twitter account. Picturing an average GM undertaking these roles reminds me of Mike Myers’s intentionally dated Black cultural appropriation jokes in

the second Austin Powers film. The second and third dungeons are somewhat better, but shed most of the puzzles for simple combat. The second dungeon features the only good joke in the book. The midboss Mucho Pan (or the Extra Bun) is based off the middle bun of the Big Mac sandwich and has the attack skill Technically a Club. That's pretty clever.



Keck and Marin are very likely RPG gamers of some variety. I imagine they were fairly excited to develop something fun when the pitch for Feast of Legends was accepted. But the fast-food TTRPG niche was not empty. Ninja Burger, for example, has been around for twenty years and is based on one of the most original and funny premises for a game. Keck and Marin entered this space

with a Wendy's themed Game of Thrones knock-off and attempted to win over the TTRPG scene with old jokes that pale in comparison even to the corporate twitter account on which they are based. Despite that, Alex Lopez's art might have almost salvaged this project had there been two to three times more of it, strategically placed to make up for the weak, vague writing. But even if the writing had been better, the subject matter remains problematic. So who is Feast of Legends for? Perhaps suburban 14.5-year-olds who haven't experienced how badly it sucks working someplace like Wendy's? Mr. Keck and Mr. Marin, if you want to work as creatives in the TTRPG design space, please just do so. You don't need to attach your work to a vapid corporate brand that enriches a handful of selfish capitalist droolers by mistreating farmers and polluting the world with fast food trash. Your creative tendencies and your love of the community of gaming is obvious, don't waste your efforts trying to build good will for white bread hawking, anti-labor Molochs. Don't you have better ideas than watered down D&D with a sandwich logo pasted on it? You have to, right? 





Impressions of New and Notable Releases

Kids on Bikes v. 1.1

The 2020 edition improves on inclusivity language and representation of people on the autism spectrum. The game itself remains excellent.

Gilmour, Jonathan, et al. *Kids on Bikes*. San Diego, California, Renegade Game Studios ; Burbank, California, 2020.

Icewind Dale: Rime of the Frost Maiden

R. A. Salvatore's Icewind Dale setting returns with an excellent module full of great stories and artwork.

Perkins, Christopher, and Wizards Of The Coast, Inc. *Icewind Dale : Rime of the Frostmaiden*. Renton, Wa, Wizards Of The Coast Llc, 2020.

Lost Omens Legends

Adds enormously to the lore of the Lost Omens setting, with profiles on some of Paizo's most interesting characters.

Amirali Attar Olyaei, et al. *Lost Omens : Legends*. Redmond, Va, Paizo Inc, 2020.

Impressions of New and Notable Releases, cont.

Lost Omens Pathfinder Society Guide

While the content of this book is aimed more at GMs and *Pathfinder* Society players than the average *Pathfinder* enthusiast, it is an easy recommendation for its art. The book is also a good companion for 2019's *Lost Omens Character Guide*.

Baker et al. *Pathfinder Lost Omens Pathfinder Society Guide* (P2). S.L., Paizo Publishing, Llc, 2020.

Foundry VTT Comercial Release

While it is one of the most demanding Virtual Table Tops in terms of its system requirements, Foundry is also one of the most versatile and best supported. When used to its fullest by a technically savvy GM, a casual observer would mistake this for a high-quality video game.

<https://foundryvtt.com/>

Tome of Beasts II

A massive new 5e bestiary with high quality art from Kobold Press.

Baur et al. *Tome of Beasts 2 for 5th Edition*. Kobold Press, 2020.

Aegis of Empires Adventure Path

An independently written adventure path with support for multiple different popular TTRPG systems.

<https://www.makeyourgamelegendary.com/products-page/aegis-of-empires/>

Impressions of New and Notable Releases, cont.

Cyberpunk RED

A much fresher take on the Cyberpunk setting than CDPR's recent first-person shooter, RED is a competent and interesting TTRPG.

Pondsmith, Mike. *Cyberpunk RED*. R. Talsorian Games, Inc, 2020.

The Anatomy of Adventure

A collection of insightful and practical adventure writing and game mastering advice essays. Author M. T. Black is a talented storyteller as well. He also includes an accurate and concise marketing chapter.

Black, M. T. *The Anatomy of Adventure*. M. T. Black Games, mtblackgames.com.

Heart: The City Beneath

A unique new RPG to keep an eye on. Artist Felix Miall grants this game an aesthetic reminiscent of Mike Mignola or Darkest Dungeon, incredibly deft with both line and space.

Howitt, Grant, and Christopher Taylor. *Heart: The City Beneath*. Rowan, Rook, and Deckard, www.drivethrurpg.com/product/308784/Heart-The-City-Beneath?filters=9999_0_0_0_0.

How to Train Your (Dungeons and) Dragons

BRENT BOWSER

The most important element of any tabletop role-playing game is the people. Good people can make a bad game worth playing, and bad people can ruin a great game. There's no shortage of articles promoting dice, introductory products, and improv classes, so I wanted to highlight tools to help you find people: Organized Play.

You might be familiar with D&D Adventurers League, Pathfinder Society, Starfinder Society, or the Mind's Eye Society, among many others for just about every game system. If you're having a hard time figuring out what day of the month your friends can get together to finally play, you may want to look into these nerdy playdates for adults.



Organized Play Systems are a way that allow for tabletop role-playing games to be run in public spaces for public play. There are standardized rules for character creation, standardized adventures to play in, and chronicling systems to keep track of your characters' treasure and advancement. Adventures are one-shots, and many times there is an overarching narrative linking them together, like a season of *Supernatural* but (sadly) without the gravelly voice of Jensen Ackles. The standardization and one-shot nature of Organized Play Systems allows for players to jump in at any time, miss a session without being terribly behind the party or story, and take your character around the globe to join game days or, best of all, conventions where you have the chance to participate in massive, multi-table, raid-type adventures.



Joining Organized Play is easy. Ask your local gaming store what nights they play, and show up. Organized Play Systems have pre-generated characters you can use until you make your own. Your local gaming store doesn't have any kind of organized play? The game publisher's website has a way of helping you find events in your area you can join. You'll also find the rules for character creation on the publisher's website. Many local chapters of organized play also coordinate through Facebook, Meetup, and Warhorn. Once there, you'll get



your player number, chronicle sheets, and whatever else your particular community uses.

After that, you're all set. Just show up and play games. Check out some other game stores and conventions, meet people, and have fun at your convenience. Most importantly, meet people. Make connections. You'll meet brand new players, veteran gamers, locals, and recently relocated players. You'll meet people from a multitude of backgrounds. The lifeblood of any organized play community is the people.

A common critique about organized play is that it's not as much fun as a home game. It's a misconception that organized play is too restrictive with its character creation rules, allowable resources, and published adventures. I'll say it again: A good tabletop role-playing game is dependent on gaming with good people.

The great thing about organized play is that you only have to commit to about four hours at a time. If it's not for you, don't go back. It's different from joining a randomly open campaign on roll20, or posting a "Looking for Roommate" ad on Craigslist, or marrying a person you met on a reality TV show. You're not going to be stuck in a long-term commitment with people you hate.

Organized play events are a great way to meet people you like and then invite them into your home game. You could even start coordinating with people you like for organized play games. Figure out who you could tolerate sharing a hotel room and being in a car for six hours with on your way to a convention.



I've also found organized play to be a great way to learn to be a game master. Limiting the number of allowable resources helps create a baseline of what to expect from your players. The published adventures you run give great insight into pacing and plotting a story, scaling encounters, treasure distribution, and world building. By running in a community of players, you'll have opportunities to run games for veteran players that can help answer questions you may have. It's like having training wheels on your game. The price point for entry is also fairly low compared to starting up an entire campaign.

The biggest benefits of participating in an organized play campaign are the skills and relationships you can develop outside of the game. Not just from game mastering, but simply participating in a community can teach interpersonal skills and foster personal growth. I've watched people find the confidence to come out of their shells and feel safe in an environment that welcomes them, and watched some of those people go on to become fantastic leaders themselves. I've been listed as a reference on people's resumes, followed job leads from people I've met through gaming, and I even performed the wedding ceremony for two people who met at a game I was running.



There are always opportunities to volunteer as an organizer for the community. I started as a game master that became the coordinator for events at my local store. Now, I am a regional coordinator for six states, with over a dozen direct reports and over a hundred volunteers in my area. I've learned how to mentor people and resolve conflict. I've learned marketing techniques and customer service. I've learned how to improve processes, set guidelines, and coach to those standards. You wouldn't necessarily think of it, but being a volunteer in organized play campaigns provides ample opportunities to manage projects and manage people, and as strange as that sounds, the skills I've developed from organized play landed me jobs as an IT manager and project manager.

I can't emphasize enough how much of a life changer organized play can be for gamers. Even if it's not your preferred method of gaming, I'd encourage everyone to give it a couple games. I can guarantee you'll form a connection with at least one person who will turn into a lifelong friend. Who knows? Maybe that friend will be the reason you find a job, the reason you make it through a tough time in your life, or could even be the person you fall in love with.

Give it a shot. It's only four hours of your life, and you've already seen the director's cut of Lord of the Rings. 

Brent Bowser is a comedian, volunteer for the Organized Play Foundation, and red panda aficionado.



Chaotic Awkward

AMANDA KAY OAKS

Kaye Galondel, a Half-Elf Druid, flicks her wrists to summon vines, which reach out and grasp her foes. Her long auburn hair blows in the wind as she focuses on the spell, holding the enemies at bay while her companions take them out with weapons and offensive spells. As the enemies escape the grasping vines or fall, she changes tactics, releasing concentration in order to shift her body into that of a wolf, snarling into melee combat.

The party victorious, they head to the bar for a night of drinking. Kaye attempts conversation with the locals to gain information, but fumbles her way awkwardly through words. She is a woman of the forest, not accustomed to such conversation.

That, and the woman behind the character just rolled a Natural One. That's a critical failure, meaning the character not only fails to do what they intended, but fails *hard*. It's no coincidence that I chose a druid, with an abysmal charisma score, as my first Dungeons & Dragons character. I've been real-life failing charisma checks for as long as I can remember.



“Did you watch DBZ last night?”

I’m eight years old, riding the bus to Fairfield West elementary, and my ears perk up as the boys in front of me chatter excitedly about the latest developments in Dragonball Z’s Cell saga, which I’ve been following religiously as it airs on Cartoon Network. I yearn to chime in, share my feelings about Android 18’s choice to join the heroes, fight alongside them to defeat her former ally, Cell.

I have become *obsessed* with Android 18, the first strong female character I’d encountered, who could keep up with the boys while also not wearing a skirt and sporting impossibly long, flowing locks that would undeniably be a disadvantage in battle. I tape a printout of her on my Composition notebook alongside the faces of a hundred and one cartoon boys I have crushes on. She stands out, a strong female character in a sea of guys.

The boys on the bus don’t talk about her much. They’re far more interested in Goku, Vegeta, and the goings-on of the men the show primarily focuses on. No matter how much I have to say about these characters or the overlooked Android 18, I can’t make the words come out. I am shy—I can’t count the number of minutes I’ve spent in agonized silence, rehearsing a single phrase in my head in the hopes I can get it to come out my mouth, only to see the conversation skate along past the point where my carefully calculated comment would fit.

This was my childhood: watching shows like *Dragonball Z* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, listening to the guys on the bus and at lunch and recess, wanting but not knowing how to join in. My composition

notebook was a carefully crafted message that screamed “I am a nerd, too!” with its photos of characters from *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *Dragonball Z*, *X-Men: Evolution*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Digimon*. I brought it with me everywhere, setting it in plain view, just hoping someone would do me the favor of striking up a conversation.

I’m just old enough to have spent my younger years without the internet, so I couldn’t log on to forums and find the conversations I wanted until high school, when I started writing fanfiction and learning how the internet can be a beautiful balm to the socially anxious nerds among us.

The thing was, I didn’t meet another girl who liked that stuff until I was older, and even if I was incredibly passionate about nerdy “boy stuff,” I was also undeniably 110% boy crazy. Regardless of what I watched or read, even when romance was the least priority, I found couples to ‘ship, picking up the smallest threads of potential romance and clinging to them. I also spent a lot of time watching shows in which there was nearly always a guy best friend who was secretly in love with the main female protagonist (the plot of many a Disney Channel original movie, not to mention shows like *Kim Possible* and *Lizzie McGuire*). As a result, I was *terrified* to talk to boys, because the cute ones were too cute and the ones that weren’t would almost definitely develop an unrequited crush on me. As far as I could see, it was impossible that I could just have guy friends.



Kaye Siondel, halfling druid, walks alongside her wizard companion, shooting sparks of lightning into the sky to underscore his passionate speech. Boffin is another halfling, though he has disguised himself to appear more menacing than stature would suggest. Still, Kaye felt a little help from the elements would be in order if they planned to sway the crowd in their favor. She is silent, knowing that speech is not her forte, but focuses her energy in the shocking blasts that leave the crowd mesmerized. If they can convince them this lynching is against the favor of their gods, then maybe, just maybe, they can save these innocent people from death.

Thankfully, the dice roll is in her favor. I sit on the couch in a circle of friends, staring down at the mat where our game master (GM) has sketched out the town map. We move our minis along this grid in combat, indicating the allotted movement. For a hobbit like this version of my druidic character, that's never very far. I've been playing with this group for a while now, and Kaye has gotten our party out of a few scrapes here and there, but for all that I'm still learning to play this game. I've been listening to a podcast dedicated to this tabletop RPG, *Pathfinder*, so I feel more confident about the rules, more willing to speak up and suggest outlandish ideas. I'm learning to ask "druid questions," like "Would you say there's vegetation in this area?" or "What's the weather like at this moment?" and loving it.

As I roll the dice to determine the success of Kaye's next move, I try to imagine what the younger version of me would think if she could see me now.



While I didn't have much of anyone to talk to at school, at home I'd sit with my kid brother and play videogames on our N64 and PS2. I loved any game where I could swing a sword, do magic, or shoot a bow and arrow, but my special favorite was a little game called *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*. I loved it for two reasons. First, the roleplay aspect allowed you to create your own character, meaning there was more than one option for a playable female avatar. I might be dating myself here, but that was hard as hell to come by when I was a young nerdlette. Second, it was one of the few RPGs at that time with a two-player mode, so Josh and I could fight together. While we had fun with him watching me kick butt on solo runs through *Ocarina of Time* and *Final Fantasy X*, my best memories of growing up with a sibling were undeniably these runs through the dungeons of *Baldur's Gate*, my Dark Elf Archer fighting alongside Josh's human warrior. Little did I know that the game I loved and devoted hours and hours of my adolescence to had a predecessor in the form of tabletop RPGs.

I don't quite recall when I first learned of the game called *Dungeons & Dragons*, but from the moment I heard about it, I wanted to play it. It didn't matter that, as I grew up, this type of activity was increasingly considered 'uncool.' I was already a lonely kid who didn't have a lot of friends, and 'cool,' for a chubby girl with glasses who could barely string a sentence together in the presence of classmates, was an option I'd flown right past long ago.

I didn't know anyone in my day-to-day who played *Dungeons & Dragons*, so I settled for my RPG video games and my fantasy

novels. Eventually, I'd join color guard and make some friends, even occasionally get invited to parties. There, if given the chance to get my hands on a console controller, I came alive. I would gain unprecedented attention as I sat surrounded by the boys, reigning supreme amongst them as the *Super Smash Bros* champion.

If I'd had even a hint of charisma, I could probably have dated any number of those guys. I knew from the uncomfortable experience of browsing the shelves at Gamestop that I was nerd-boy kryptonite. Between 7th and 8th grade, I'd lost 50 pounds and, freshman year, gotten contacts. I was a walking *She's All That* transformation, minus the part of the makeover where I magically also gain confidence.

There were two types of reactions to my presence in Gamestop. The best case scenario was that the guy working there would follow me around, being entirely too helpful and standing entirely too close. I'd read the cases of the latest RPGs and fighter games, steering clear of your *Call of Duty* and *Halo*, as I wasn't very good at first-person shooters and hated to feel like I fit into the "girls aren't good at video games" stereotypes.

The second type, I loathed. Sometimes, the guys would be combative, quizzing me, daring me to reveal that I was just there to buy something for a sibling or boyfriend, or only interested in *Dance, Dance Revolution* (a game that, admittedly, had contributed a solid amount of my weight loss). When I did play *Halo* with my brother or boyfriend, I learned that I had to mute my mic, or stop playing a character with a pink or purple suit--otherwise, a chorus of "Are you a girl?" would blare through the

speakers, followed by mocking if I failed to rack up kills.

This gatekeeping made me feel unwelcome and made me worry that I could never, ever find a guy who'd teach me to play *Magic: The Gathering* or *Dungeons & Dragons*. As a girl growing up in the early 2000s, there was a price to being a beginner. That price was mockery. If they had to be angry, I much preferred the rage borne of being “beat by a girl” to the self-righteousness of a guy who knew anything in nerd culture better than I did.



Art by Will Moore



In high school, I had a couple of close guy friends who would occasionally play video games with me. Once, I even got invited to a LAN party, where I came close to winning the *Super Smash Bros* tournament. These were beautiful moments, few and far in between. As my brother and I grew up, we grew apart—he leaned towards the first-person shooters popular amongst his friends, while I hid in the basement playing *Final Fantasy* and *Kingdom Hearts* whenever I could get him to let me use his PS2. Once he got the Xbox, I was able to co-opt the older console, even taking it with me to college where I’d spend lonely hours playing through *Kingdom Hearts II* much to the confusion of my roommate, who rushed a sorority.

They say you’re supposed to find “your people” in college, yet I didn’t, not really. I made some friends in the Creative Writing and English majors, who’d talk to me about books and writing. My social anxiety still reigned supreme, but I broke through now and again and made a solid, small group of friends by the end of my sophomore year. Yet there was an absence, a gap. I knew that, somewhere, there were the right kind of nerds, playing tabletop RPGs and video games. I even knew where they lived—in the boys only dorm that smelled like sweaty socks and Doritos. But, once again, a gate I couldn’t pass through (or, more truthfully, one I didn’t dare to approach).



I graduated from college in 2014, which was also the year of Gamergate. By this time, I wasn't playing video games much anymore, since the PS2 in my dorm room had proved too much of a distraction from my studies. Still, I remained engaged at the periphery of gaming conversation, following a few key personalities on Twitter. So, I saw enough vague tweets about this "Gamergate" to pique my interest.

I want to say I was surprised by what I found when I read about Gamergate, but, unfortunately, I was not. That there was a targeted harassment campaign aimed at female developers in the video game industry was nothing shocking to a girl who had on occasion been bullied out of Gamestop or away from a particular game at the party. Guys rallied behind the hashtag #gamergate, writing in opposition to the very same increased diversity of gaming content and representation of gaming identity that I'd been thrilled to experience over the past few years. The proliferation of playable female avatars, among other things, was viewed by some as an attack on traditional gaming culture, bemoaning feminism's influence on the gaming world.

I didn't follow Gamergate too closely. For one, I hadn't played many of the games mentioned in the articles I read, and for another, I didn't need more reasons to feel uncomfortable in the world I secretly loved. I had avoided *World of Warcraft* and other games that drew my interest because I was terrified of the multiplayer mode, that I would be asked to interact and

collaborate with random internet men who would begin their rallying chorus of “Are you a girl?!” which would, more often than not, turn into sexual harassment or outright bullying. To play “like a girl” was my greatest fear, and I wouldn’t let myself be a beginner even in something I loved. This kept me out of massive multiplayer gaming, and kept me far, far away from the tabletop games like *Magic: The Gathering* and *Dungeons & Dragons* that had drawn my secret fascination for years.

Gamergate didn’t scare me so much as it reaffirmed what I already knew. Alongside it, though, was the undeniable wave of actual change. People like Felicia Day wrote TV shows and books centered around the existence of the “female gamer” as a real, valid identity—as real, valid people who could exist in the world as something other than sex object or laughable n00b. I cried listening to Felicia Day’s memoir, *You’re Never Weird on the Internet*, overwhelmed to hear an actual female voice talk about nerd culture from the inside. In spite of Gamergate, in spite of having less and less time to actually game, I was beginning to feel, in some small way, seen.



I hate how people constantly tell you “it gets better” when you grow up with social anxiety. But, in my case at least, it did get better. I graduated from college, moved out of my parents’ house, and started working as a Success Coach for community college students. Here, I found my voice. I couldn’t make myself speak up for me, but somehow, when it wasn’t for me, I could. My AmeriCorps group were built-in friends, who taught me to play beer-pong for the first time and always, always remembered to include me. I hung out with two of the guys, easily accepted as someone who knew about nerd stuff and could hold her own in a deep discussion of anything Marvel.

And then, grad school. A newly-minted, mildly less awkward version of me rolled into my MFA program and found *my people*. While I was undeniably on the more “basic” end of my fantastic new literary friend group, I finally had a way to let loose all my nerdy tendencies. Harry Potter marathons? Check. Playing *Skyrim*? Check. In-depth film analysis of all the latest Marvel movies? Check.

At 24, I had finally found a group of people who meshed with me so much that I was finally able to let all sides of my multi-faceted personality run free. I felt safe, and normal, and capable of indulging in nerd culture without feeling like the odd one out.

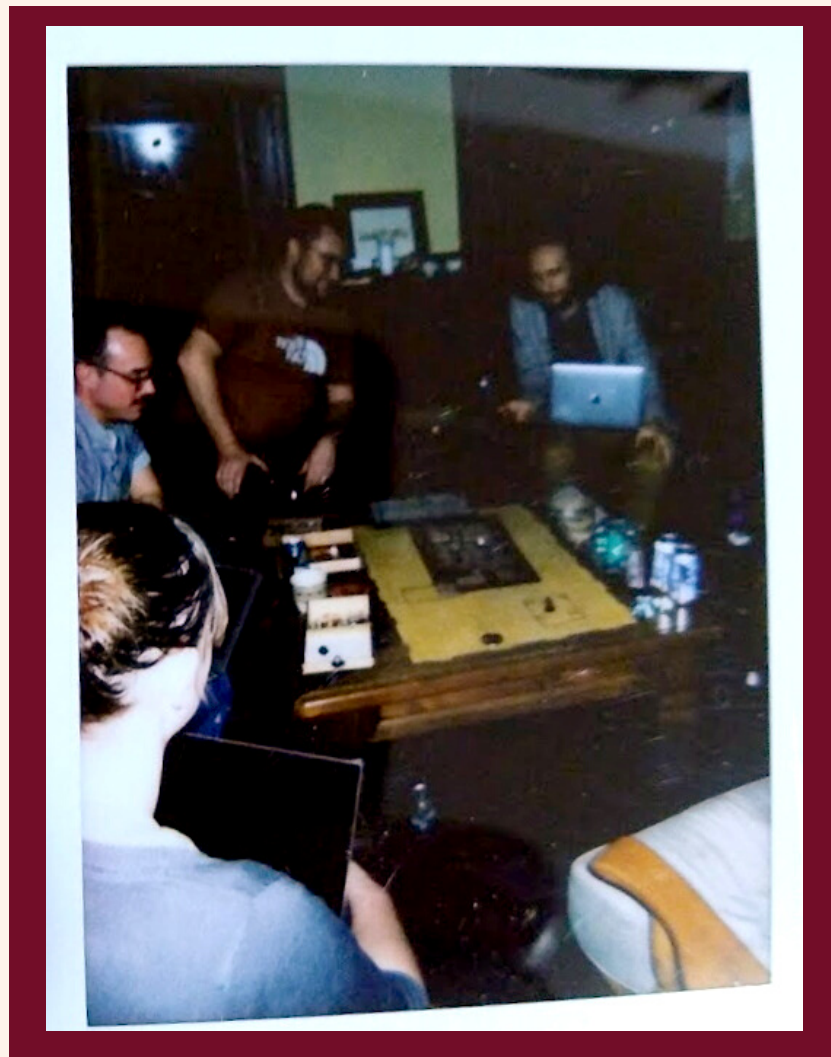
When a large chunk of these people moved away after the program ended, it broke my heart. The golden age of being among “my people” seemed to have passed, and I would have to settle for occasional board game nights with my boyfriend’s friends. And then, as luck would have it, I received an unexpected

text:

Mel gave me your number and said you might be interested in joining a D&D campaign I'm going to run?

Was I, a 27-year-old woman now working full time (and then some) at the university where I'd earned my master's, interested in finally entering the world of tabletop gaming I'd dreamed of since I was a kid?

Hell yes I was!



In recent years, I've gotten so used to my routine and my typical people that I often forget I even have social anxiety. It just doesn't come into play much when you're running on autopilot, interacting with the same people in more or less the same roles more often than not.

The first time I pulled up outside the house where I'd play *Pathfinder* for the first time, I remembered. I sat in the car looking at my phone, paralyzed by the reality of a social situation I did not know how to navigate.

It was ridiculous. I knew most of these guys at least casually, part of the broader circle of MFA folks I'd gotten to know during school. But somewhere down in my little nerd girl heart, I remembered the scoffing tones of the guys in Gamestop who didn't believe a girl could play RPG video games. These unknown entities I was about to play with could be anyone. They could be those guys. My social anxiety brain ran into overdrive—I was breaking a cardinal rule of growing up as a nerdy girl. I was about to be a beginner. In public. In front of *men*. What the actual fuck had I been thinking?

And then one of those guys pulled up and got out of his car and my brain relaxed a fraction. *Oh right*, I thought, *my friends are here*. I dug deep, found some courage, and followed him inside the old house, which I'd been in once or twice before. The refrain of *oh god, new people* didn't quite shut up as we made introductions. I pulled up the character sheet my friend had made for me and read the stats, calming my mind with the realization that a lot of this stuff was pretty familiar from my old *Baldur's Gate* days. Once I went full-nerd-obsessive mode on D&D culture

(in other words, like three days later), I would learn that the games I'd grown up playing actually owed their existence to *Dungeons & Dragons*, the forefather of the modern RPG. All this time I thought I was walking in as a beginner, but I had all this half-forgotten RPG knowledge to light my way.

I did myself a favor designing my first characters, making them quiet, awkward druids who didn't require much in the way of roleplay out of me. And yet, I soon rediscovered the girl I knew well from the classroom, who had a lot of Opinions and wasn't afraid to speak them. After that first sesh, I learned about the world of actual play podcasts, and started binge-listening my way through *The Glass Cannon Podcast*. This gave me a quick and perhaps occasionally obnoxious confidence in my understanding of game mechanics, aided by the fact that I had somehow become part of two campaigns in which I played similar druid characters named Kaye. I knew how to Druid like nobody's business, and I wasn't afraid to do it.

In spite of this, my own personal dragon of social anxiety continued to rear its head *every single time* I drove over there. I would sit in my car, letting the GCP play out, working up the courage to walk through the door, knowing that my fear was utterly irrational and unfounded. The moment I got inside, I knew, I would remember that these were not scary monsters, but in fact, my friends.

It took me a while to figure it out. Why was the social anxiety lingering week after week in spite of the fact that these guys weren't new to me anymore?

“Guys” here is the key word. Years upon years of social conditioning have made me someone who struggles to feel at ease around men, who is always waiting for the other shoe to drop no matter how much I know it isn’t going to.

The girl sitting on the bus wishing she could join in talking about *Dragonball Z* never imagined a future where she’d be part of not one, but two groups of tabletop gamers. She never imagined a future where she’d blink and then, suddenly, most of the friends who lived near her were men. And yet, here I am, a 27-year-old whose social calendar is filled, more often than not, with tabletop gaming sessions with two groups of guys I am happy to call my friends.

It’s not that I don’t know, rationally, that I am safe here. I wouldn’t keep coming back for these sessions if I didn’t believe I was welcome there, truly just one of the group. I know it’s okay. It’s just that on some primal level, my brain doesn’t *feel* like this is my life. Because for most of my childhood, the dominant message was that *girls don’t game*. That’s why there was only one option in Mario Kart, over-the-top girly Peach, and many more games with no female playable avatar. Hell, even Pokemon games took a while to let you tell Professor Oak if you are “a boy” or “a girl.” And if the looks I got at Gamestop were any indication, the way I’d been brushed aside when I went into a tabletop gaming or comics shop was worse, like this deeper step into nerd territory wasn’t meant, wasn’t allowed, for me. It’s gotten so much better, and yet I’m still working to unlearn that understanding of my place at the table.



Lillian Avarest saunters to the front of the group, a devilish grin on her face. Her bright clothing and carefully made-up face demand attention as she waves her arm in the air, dramatically draws a card from her tarot deck, and reads aloud.

“The odds are in our favor, friends,” she says, inspiring courage in her party as they battle the man who’s come to claim the silver we’ve decided not to give him.

As the battle continues, she reaches into the pocket of her skirts, drawing out one of the coins. “If you want it so badly,” she says, the coin coming to float midair above her palm, “Then take it.” With her mind, she sends the coin flying at the enemy, hitting him square in the center of the forehead, winning the battle.

She takes a jaunty curtsy and grins.

The woman who rolled that Natural 20 smiles, too, learning to be okay with the attention that comes with playing a charismatic Bard. My new character is nothing like me, and lets me step into being someone who commands, demands, and enjoys attention. I’ve written myself a challenge in Lillian, and playing this new character is more fun than I could have ever imagined. I’m getting a taste for what it would be like, to be confident and sure of myself. Maybe I’m learning that in real life, too.



Time and time again, I pack up the purple set of dice I was generously gifted, throw my laptop in its bag, drive all of five minutes to my friend's house, and coach myself to get out of the car. To walk past the learned discomfort into a space where I know I am, in fact, perfectly welcome. I do this because I'm not a girl anymore. I'm a grown woman, a gamer, a person enjoying a fun time around the gameboard with her friends. I do this because I know that pushing past the lingering discomfort, the sense that I'm doing something I'm not allowed to do, not really, is worth it.

Because I love this game, love stepping into the shoes of characters who can do things I never could. I dream up entire worlds not alone and in my head, like I did as a kid, but in conjunction with a group of friends. We're imagining out entire scenes, and writing our story together. 





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Inclusivity Statement:

This journal is not the place to submit screeds against woke culture in gaming. As adults who agree to play pretend based on a set of predetermined rules, we have evolved beyond the need to pass judgement upon marginalized identities. Inclusivity is in. Misogyny is passé.

