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Fumbling Through Fantasy

Walking into the dragon's lair, the air is heavy with the smell of sulfur, as the smoke in the air mixes with the damp stone that your boots land on as you walk. You and your party are tired from your journey, but you can't stop now. You set down your packs and ready your weapons as a colossal silver dragon comes into view, her magnificent wings spreading across the cave. Her roar seems to shake the very stone around you, but you stand firm, sword and shield in hand. "Roll initiative." Dungeons and Dragons, also known as D&D, is a tabletop roleplaying game where the player makes a character and dives headfirst into the world that the game master (GM) controls. In my experience, many people that are yet to play are apprehensive about playing for multiple reasons. This can range from how complicated it is and not having anyone to play with, to not having the imagination or the tools needed to play and create a game. I have been playing and DMing my games/campaigns for just over 5 years, so in this essay, I will be talking about my experiences. This ranges from my first time playing, my current campaign, to even my own experiences with creating and GMing my own game.

I completely understand where this apprehensiveness comes from, as I was there at one point. I have always been an imaginative kid, coming up with my own stories, and having my own imaginary friends. I even had imaginary fairies that followed me around when I was in kindergarten. I never knew how to share these stories that I came up with and experienced in my mind, and in middle and high school I tried to write my own stories. In high school, my

boyfriend at the time was playing D&D, and was very enthusiastic about it. At this point, I had suppressed my overactive imagination, knowing that if I let it run its course, I would never shut up. He eventually convinced me to talk to his DM, whose name is Jeb. Jeb and I talked for a while, with him explaining how D&D works, and helping me make a character. We eventually landed on a Aasimar cleric named Winter. We decided on a cleric because I have never liked being up close and personal with enemies, even in games, and clerics were long distance, but had enough health and damage that I didn't have to worry about getting hurt too badly. I had planned that I would simply join for one session, just so I could see what my boyfriend was raving about and then drop the campaign afterwards. I was incredibly nervous to start, scared I wouldn't understand, and somehow mess up the story for this GM who I didn't really know. I didn't have any dice, and I was scared that I didn't understand any of my spells.

I joined in the middle of combat, and we were fighting a dinosaur, and I was immediately scared that I would mess up and kill my character on my first day. I asked so many questions, and I ended up being too scared to use any of my spells, because I didn't really understand what any of them did. I just stayed where I was, swinging my weapon, slowly lowering the dinosaur's health. After the combat was done, I introduced my character, and I was hooked on the way that my character was able to interact with the world. I didn't have any tools other than D&D Beyond and my fellow players, but despite how new I was, I immediately felt at home. I had finally found a group that was happy to indulge in my imagination, and didn't even blink when I would suggest insane ideas, simply telling me to roll, or how I could make it better. I was so used to people shutting me down and telling me to settle down my ideas and imagination, but I had finally found a group that allowed me to simply be myself, even if it was through playing someone else. Later in the campaign, Winter was wrapped up in a cool storyline about gods falling down to earth and needing a vessel to survive. Winter's goddess, who she got her powers

from since she was a cleric, was called the Raven Queen. The Raven Queen possessed Winter, imbuing her with godly powers, allowing me to roll out of 30 instead of 20, like normal players. 1-19 were as normal rolls, but 20-29 were considered a crit, and a 30 was considered a “godly event,” where I got to tell the GM what happens. On my last session of this campaign, we were fighting a fire god. The whole party was planning for weeks, trying to figure out how we could fight this god and come out on top. This god we were fighting was resistant or immune to most types of damage, including fire, which is one of the heavy hitters for D&D spells. I got the idea to use Thaumaturgy, a minor magic spell that allows the player to make small effects. For example, you can make your voice louder, slam a door, light a small fire, or shake the floor slightly. It's mostly used for adding flair or distracting enemies without harming them. I had the idea to basically shout directly into the gods ear, hopefully bursting its eardrum or something so one of my party members might be able to get advantage, which basically means to roll twice and take the higher roll. When Jeb asked me to roll, I was expecting it to simply be how well it works, and I rolled. He told me that if I hit 30, I could tell him what happened, if I rolled anything less than that, nothing would happen. By some kind of stroke of luck, I managed to roll a 30, a 3.33% chance, and I took a chance. I explained that I wanted to kill the god in one blow, knowing that there was a chance Jeb would simply shut it down, but instead, he let it happen. I was surprised that he let me, but he knew that i really wanted to test the limits of my characters power, and so he let me. I feel like this really shows how well DM's and players can work together if you give them the chance.

Many people that I have talked to complain about the rigidness of D&D, but I feel like people only have this idea because either they haven't found a GM that meshes with their style of playing, or they simply have not played yet. I'm still with this group to this day, and I still play with them every two weeks. Currently, we are playing in a world called Sigil, and I'm playing a

Fairy Cleric. One of my favorite things about D&D is the customization. Like being up close to enemies and dealing a lot of damage? Play a Barbarian! Prefer to be further away so you don't get damaged as much? Play a spellcaster or ranger! Want to sneak around and deal damage without being seen? Play a rogue! And if you don't like any of your options, you can talk to your GM and simply make a new class, one that is all your own. I have done this for myself, and I have learned that doing this isn't ruining the potential storyline, in fact, it's just adding another layer that the GM can immerse you in. When I first made Winter, I let Jeb come up with a good majority of my character, feeling that since I was joining in the middle of his campaign, that I might mess it all up. But for my newer characters, I've started making my own backgrounds and backstories, because I know that if it goes against the story of the campaign, Jeb will simply request something else or explain that it does not work. There are so many groups, communities, and apps that can get you started on your D&D journey for free. In my experience of playing, I have never met a single group that is not willing to teach a new player. In my current campaign, we have a new player named Ryan, and the party took him under their wings, just as they took me under theirs. I don't think I have ever seen someone's eyes light up just as much as walking into a D&D shop and asking if you can play with them and not knowing how it works.

One other thing I have heard people talk about is the imagination point of view. Not everyone is super creative, and that's completely understandable. There are 2 different ways you can do it. Run it off of a module (a pre-made campaign), or you can homebrew. This is the same in my current campaign that I am GMing on my own. I am running my own campaign, and it's called a 'homebrew' game, which means I came up with it all on my own, but this is not the only way. If you don't want to come up with it on your own, there are pre-made campaigns you can use for free. One thing I have talked to other GM's about is the fear of a lack of imagination to run your own game, but in my opinion, you don't need too much of an imagination to at least

start. A new GM can use one of these pre-made settings and run a group of 2 or 3 of their friends along a pre-made adventure. In my own campaign, I have had a few people come into my game, completely unaware of how to play the game, and one of my friends named Evi is the perfect example of this. She and I were talking, and she mentioned that she found the idea of D&D to be interesting, but she was afraid to begin because she wasn't sure how it worked, and she didn't want to slow down the flow of the campaign for people to explain things to her. I helped her come up with a character, a dragonborn bard, and she has been playing with me now since October of 2023, and we still play every 2 weeks. It is wonderful to watch her become comfortable with her own character and spells, coming up with her own ideas and background.

In conclusion, my journey with D&D has taken me from being a nervous player, full of questions and hesitation, to becoming a confident player and a member of a group that celebrates creativity and ideas, to finally stepping behind the GM screen. One little snippet that I haven't shared is the quiet moments. The times when the Zoom call I game on was silent during a break, everyone was doing their own thing, from getting a snack, re-reading their character sheet, or simply playing with a pet. In the silence, I didn't feel awkward how I usually do, the silence that I usually feel like I need to fill with something, either my voice or music, it was just calm. I felt like I belonged. D&D isn't just a game. It's a place where you can be yourself, even if you don't use your own persona. And so, I will continue to fumble through the fantasy worlds I find myself in, even if it starts with a hesitant first step into a dragon's den.