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YOU'RE ALL AT A TAVERN

The day I met Abel, Jhaden, and Ganubi, we got arrested for brawling in a bar.

In our defense, we were fighting for a righteous cause. One of the regulars was six beers past tipsy when he started running his mouth and spouting the worst kind of reactionary politics. Abel and I found it offensive and told him to shut up; Jhaden isn't much for talk, so he hit the guy with a stool. Rhetorical became physical, and the four of us lined up on the same side of the dispute.

The cops must have been nearby, because the next thing I knew they were throwing us in the back of a wagon. We stewed in a cell overnight before Jhaden was able to use some kind of family connection to get us released. I don't know what happened to the drunk guy.

A thing like that will bond a group of young men pretty quickly, and soon we were spending most of our time together—sharing a couple of rooms in a cheap boardinghouse, working together on whatever freelance gigs we could find. The jobs weren't always on the books, but we felt like we were doing good work.

Jhaden was strong as a bull, Ganubi a natural charmer, Abel educated and clever. We got in our share of fights, but I had worked in a hospital, and when anyone got hurt, I'd do my best to patch them up.

I'd like to think I did my part in combat, too—shooting searing rays of light out of my fingers, stunning enemies with thunderclaps of sonic energy. Sometimes I'd summon a giant badger from the celestial planes and command it to do my bidding. Few things end a fight quicker than a magical weasel chewing on your opponent's leg.

I am not a wizard, but I play one every Tuesday night. To be nerdy about it—and trust me, there is no other way to approach this—I am a divine spell caster, a lawful neutral twelfth-level cleric. In the world of Dungeons & Dragons, that makes me a pretty major badass.

Dungeons & Dragons—D&D, to the initiated—is a game played at a table, usually by around half a dozen participants. It's sold in stores and has specific rules, like Monopoly or Scrabble, but is otherwise radically different. D&D is a role-playing game, one where participants control characters in a world that exists largely in their collective imagination.

Even if you've never played D&D, you've probably heard of it, and when I admitted I'm a player, your subconscious mind probably filed me under "Nerds, Hopeless"—unless you happen to be one of us. Role-playing games don't have a great reputation. In movies and TV shows, D&D serves as a signal of outsider status. It's how you know a character's a hopeless geek: A rule book and a bunch of weird-shaped dice is to nerds what a black hat is to the villain in a cowboy movie.

Most people know D&D only as some strange thing the math club did in the corner of the high school cafeteria, or the hobby of the creepy goth kid down the street. Even worse, they have the vague sense it's deviant or satanic—don't D&D players run around in the woods and worship demons, or commit suicide when they lose a game?

Admitting you play Dungeons & Dragons is only slightly less stig-matizing than confessing cruelty to animals or that you wet the bed. It is not to be done in polite company.

But I am immune to your scorn. I know magic.

Jhaden, Abel, Ganubi, and I are freedom fighters. The shared politics that brought us together in that bar are more profound than liberal or conservative; we're all proponents of an active approach to humanity's problems. We want to organize the workers of the world and to strike out against those who would hold us in bondage.

In contrast, our opponents fear change. They don't want to upset their comfortable bourgeois lives or take risks that might overturn the political order. Time is on our side, they say—real progress occurs slowly, over generations. They think we should wait and things will work themselves out.

It's so cowardly and stupid. You can't wait out vampires.

Let's start with a brief overview, for the uninitiated: Dungeons & Dragons takes place within a fantasy world that is invented by its players but inspired by centuries of storytelling and literature. Books like J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* helped set the tone: heroic knights and wise old magicians battling the forces of evil. A typical D&D session might find a party of adventurers setting off to search an underground cave system for treasure and having to fight all the slobbering monsters lurking in the dark.

But D&D isn't a board game with a preprinted map and random-ized game play (roll a die, move four spaces closer to the treasure, pick up a card: "You got scared by a goblin! Go back two spaces"). Instead, each setting is conceived in advance by one of the partici-pants and then actively navigated by the players.

The person who does all the prep work is called the Dungeon

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Master, or DM. It's his job to dream up a scenario, something like "Archaeologists have discovered a pharaoh's tomb in the desert, and the players are grave robbers who have to break in and steal the hidden treasure." He also has to sketch out the details, like making a map and deciding where the traps are, where the treasure is, and what monsters are guarding it.

This act of creation gives the players an unknown world to explore and keeps each game session different from the last. It's sort of like sitting down to play Monopoly, except you can't see the names or costs of the properties until you land on them.

An experienced DM takes game design even further. He might decide the players should start out in a Bedouin camp near the tomb and negotiate with the sheik to buy a couple of camels. He could plan for them to be waylaid by desert raiders on the way to the tomb. And once they've found the pharaoh's treasure, he may ask them to make a moral choice: The treasure carries a curse, and if it's removed from the tomb, the region will suffer ten years of famine. The players will have to weigh getting rich and letting thousands die against leaving empty-handed and protecting the innocent.

At this level, setting up a role-playing game becomes something like writing a screenplay or novel. And just as fantasy fiction may include all kinds of different settings and plots, a fantasy role-playing game does not have to be constrained to a standard medieval setting.

Vampires have always hunted man, but we were not always in their thrall. For millennia they hid in the shadows, keeping their numbers small, feeding only on humans who wouldn't be missed. The few stories that betrayed their existence were dismissed as urban legend or lazy fiction.

But at the beginning of the twenty-first century, something changed.

Vampires were tired of hiding, of letting weaker humans ruin the planet. So they gathered, and they plotted, and one dark night, they struck.

Most humans died without ever knowing their enemy. The vampires had magically bound our leaders to their will, and on their command, the armies of the world exploded upon one another. Those who survived the first strike had nowhere to hide: A magically enchanted retrovirus mutated ordinary animals and plants, turning them into monsters that overran both ruined cities and poisoned wilderness.

What few shreds of humankind remained were easily rounded up, brought to a dozen vampire-controlled cities, and locked into pens, like cattle. Our species survived, but only as a food source for Earth's new masters.

We call the time the vampires took over the Nightfall. The Dawn is when humans fought back.

Most people who play Dungeons & Dragons don't just sit down for a single, self-contained session, like they would with a board game. Instead, they join a "campaign," a group that meets on a regular basis and uses the same characters in the same world, building on past actions. One week, the players raid the pharaoh's tomb, and the next, they pick up where they left off, facing the consequences of their decisions.

As these campaigns go on for weeks and months and even years, the successes and failures of past sessions provide history and context and suggest new challenges. If the players stole the pharaoh's treasure and cursed the land with famine, a DM might design a future session where they're hunted by vengeful farmers.

Players are both audience and author in D&D; they consume the DM's fiction but rewrite the story with their actions. And as authors, they're free to make their own decisions. If a troll is trying to eat you, you can hit him with a sword, shoot him with an arrow, or run away—it's up to you. For that matter, you could sing him a song,

try to recruit him into Scientology, or lie down for a nap. Your choice might be a dumb one, but it's still yours to make.

Unlike board games, which limit the player to a small set of actions, or video games, which offer a large but finite set of preprogrammed possibilities, role-playing games give the player free will. As long as it doesn't violate the integrity of the fictional universe—proclaiming that up is down or suddenly transmogrifying into Abraham Lincoln—you can do whatever you want.

The resulting game play is rather different than other pastimes. In a game of Clue, you are asked to solve a murder mystery but must do so by moving a token around a board and looking at playing cards. If Clue was played like D&D, you could grab the lead pipe, beat a confession out of Colonel Mustard, and have sex with Miss Scarlet on the desk in the conservatory.

There are rules, of course. Books and books of rules, sold at $19.95 each, which inform a player's decisions and determine their success. Attacking someone with a lead pipe? That's armed combat with an improvised weapon, and page 113 of the *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* explains how to figure out if you hit your target and how much it hurt. Seducing another character might require a Diplomacy check (page 71), a Will save (page 136), and maybe an opposed Sense Motive roll against your Bluff skill (page 64). It's not romantic, but it works.

All this free will can wreak havoc with the game's continuing story. A DM might spend weeks designing a complex network of caverns to explore, filled with clever traps and new monsters to fight. But if the players stop at the mouth of the cave and decide they'd rather go back to town and get drunk, they are free to do so—and they'll derail the story in the process.

In order to keep freedom of action from leading to chaos, a good DM will usually weave a primary conflict into his story. This often

takes the form of a classic heroic quest: a wrong to right, an enemy to destroy, or a world to save.

> *For a century after the vampires came to power, they imprisoned and fed on what was left of the human race. Stuck in the pens and denied the use of modern technology, humanity lived in fear, never knowing when their masters would descend from the city to feed.*
>
> *But the undead were arrogant, and humans adapted. They watched the vampires cast spells and copied their actions, developing their own knowledge of magic. These secrets were shared and used to communicate with other pens. Together, humanity planned its escape.*
>
> *And one day, as dawn swept across the globe, the people of the pens rose up and fought. The vampires were taken by surprise, but their power was still great. Many humans were recaptured, and many more died. But some escaped and returned to their abandoned cities, where they constructed defenses to keep the vampires at bay.*
>
> *In the generation since the Dawn, both human and vampire have rebuilt. We hold a handful of cities, but they do too, and thousands are still captive in the pens. Beyond the walled cities, there is wilderness, filled with monsters.*
>
> *But we're not hiding, and we do not rest. We learn, and we prepare, and we plan for the day we can take our planet back.*

Frodo Baggins needed the help of three hobbits, two men, an elf, a dwarf, and a wise old wizard to save the world. So nobody expects a role-playing nerd to go it alone. Uniquely among tabletop games—and especially uniquely among activities enjoyed by teenage boys—Dungeons & Dragons is cooperative, not competitive. Players work together to advance the story and solve problems, not to beat each other to a finish line.

This means there's rarely a real "winner" in a D&D game; no

single player comes out on top. In fact, winning is something of an alien concept—most campaigns never last long enough to reach their dramatic conclusion. It's more about the journey than the destination, to invoke that old cliché, and about developing your part in the story.

A player in a game of D&D doesn't just push a premade plastic token around a board. Instead, they create a "player character," or PC, a unique persona to be inhabited like an actor in a role, imbuing it with motivation and will and action. It's like *Avatar,* but with knights instead of weird blue cat people.

Of course, D&D is not a playacting exercise. At the most fundamental level, a PC is defined by a bunch of numbers written down on a piece of paper—the DNA of an imaginary person. (It's no coincidence that so many people who play the game also happen to be keen on math and science.)

At the start of a new game, players roll a handful of dice to determine their PC's basic attributes, following the directions set out in a rule book. Some of these attributes define the character physically: how strong they are, how dexterous, how hardy. Others measure personality traits, like whether they are perceptive or oblivious, strong willed or weak. Each score is recorded by the player and kept for future reference.

Over the course of a game, a player will continually refer to these attributes to measure their success in different actions. Want to pick up a heavy rock and throw it at the barbarians invading your castle? That'll require a high strength score. Trying to dive under the trellis gate before it closes? Sorry, your dexterity is too low.

Next, a player has to select one of about a dozen character classes. This is something like choosing a profession and has a profound effect on the role a PC plays in the game. Classes are best explained within the context of *The Lord of the Rings*—as the most mainstream

example of the fantasy genre, *LOTR* references come up all the time in Dungeons & Dragons.

Aragorn, the scruffy hero who turns out to be heir to the kingdom of men, would be a "ranger" in a D&D campaign—at home in the wilderness, an expert tracker, equally comfortable with a bow or a blade. Legolas the elf would be a ranger, too. Boromir and Gimli the dwarf would probably be "fighters"—masters of brute-force combat, emphasizing power rather than a ranger's finesse. Gandalf? They call him a wizard, but D&D "wizards" have to study a lot, write their spells in a book, and use magic ingredients to make anything cool happen. Gandalf's really more like a "sorcerer"—someone who is born with special abilities and doesn't have to learn them. The diminutive hobbits are probably "rogues"—stealthy, agile, and sly. Often, since they're so good at sneaking around, rogues are played as thieves. But our good-hearted hobbits don't have to be pickpockets to play the class properly.*

There are many other classes in the game that aren't represented in Middle-earth. "Clerics" are warrior priests. They can cast spells but frequently do so in order to assist other players, such as to repair a wound. "Paladins" are chivalrous knights who fight evil and follow a strict code of conduct. And "barbarians" are uneducated bruisers, likely to fly into a homicidal rage. They're the anabolic steroid users of the D&D world.

Once they've been assigned a class, PCs are allocated specific skills, as chosen from lists in the rule book. They may learn only a small number, so skills must be chosen wisely: If a player wants their rogue to be a cat burglar, it's best to concentrate on skills like "Open Lock"

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*That sound you hear right now is thousands of fantasy geeks shouting their dissent. Debating what D&D classes fictional characters or real people would belong to is a contentious sport in nerd society. I once spent hours at work arguing with a colleague about the makeup of our office. At the end of the day, we agreed the boss was a dwarf rogue.

and "Move Silently." Any time the PC tries to perform a related action in the game, their success will depend on it.

Characters are also usually rounded out with a personal history, something that places them in the context of the larger D&D campaign. This is where the process becomes more art than science; each PC is its own work of fiction.

A good backstory can make or break a game. It lends depth to the fictional world, provides the player with motivation for future decision-making, and breathes life into a collection of numbers and rules.

I am Weslocke, a cleric. I was born in Kyoto, one of the few cities reoccupied after the Dawn, and I will not rest until humanity is free.

Generations of my family have dedicated their lives to this cause. My great-great-grandmother, a doctor, practiced her art in secret after the vampires threw her in the pens. Her children learned and did the same, hoping that one day humans would be strong enough to fight back. When that day came, my parents aided in the battle with healing magic, spells that stitch wounds and mend broken bones.

After Kyoto was resettled, my parents pushed to continue the war and destroy the vampires entirely. Few would listen. But they never gave up and raised me in the hope I could finish what they started. I learned to fight, and to heal, and to hate the vampires, and want nothing but their destruction.

When my parents died, I swore to uphold their legacy. I made plans to leave the city, to develop the skills needed to fight the undead, and to find other people who shared my goals. And then, one fateful day, I got arrested for fighting in a bar.

Vampire World is a creation of Morgan Harris-Warrick, a thirty-three-year-old executive for a family-centric marketing agency. By day he runs focus groups, studying how kids are likely to respond to

new advertising campaigns. By night he's a Dungeon Master, inventor of the Nightfall and the Dawn.

In any game of Dungeons & Dragons, the Dungeon Master serves as author, director, and referee. A good DM must be creative, designing a world from scratch and spinning it into narrative. But they also must possess an ordered, logical mind, capable of recalling and understanding hundreds of pages' worth of rules.

It's a role that suits Morgan. Tall and rangy, with a shock of short black hair, he dresses in the manner of a nerd artiste, wrapped in a trench coat and topped with a wool felt fedora. He's technical (he once built and programmed his own digital video recorder, instead of just buying a TiVo) but not ignorant of aesthetic pursuits: He's written two unproduced screenplays, including an alternate telling of *Peter Pan* where Tinker Bell dies after a cynical audience refuses to clap.

Morgan started playing D&D when he was in fifth grade. "I was a socially inept little geek when I was a kid," he says. "D&D was a way to socialize that you could be geeky and still do." On Saturdays, he'd walk over to a friend's house and spend the afternoon playing with a small group of like-minded peers.

"It wasn't an ongoing campaign like what I'm running now," he explains. "We had characters, and whoever felt like running an adventure would write something up and we'd throw our characters into it. There weren't big, ongoing stories. There wasn't really even much of a world."

The kids took turns running the game, so Morgan didn't really come into his own as a Dungeon Master until he was a few years older. "In high school we had a D&D club, where we'd meet once a week in a spare room," he says. "I had a separate campaign that I created for that, based on Piers Anthony's *Xanth* books."

In college, a wealth of other social activities beckoned, and Mor-

gan stopped gaming. But when he moved to New York City a couple years after graduation, he started thinking about playing again. "It's a good way to meet people, people with interests similar to mine," he explains. "I had discovered the joys of Craigslist and how you could find people with any specific interest, so I thought, 'Why don't I see if I can find a D&D group?'"

He already knew what kind of game he wanted to play. "I'm a sucker for the postapocalyptic stuff . . . something I recognize, but changed," he says. "I'd seen an anime film called *Vampire Hunter D,* and the premise was that vampires had taken over the world, but it was set after the humans had fought back and won. And I was watching that, and I was thinking, 'You know, this is a fun enough movie, but they skipped the really interesting part, while the humans are just starting to rise up against the vampires. Let's go back and fill in that story.'"

> *Today our quest was interrupted. We had secured passage aboard a ship sailing to San Francisco, hoping to find new allies in our fight against the vampires. But two days into the journey, the sails went slack and our ship was engulfed in a murky fog. Before we could prepare ourselves, we were set upon by unnatural creatures—bodies like men, but with scaly hides, webbed hands, and the wide-set eyes and gaping mouths of fish.*
>
> *Taken by surprise, we were captured by the creatures—common pirates, despite their appearance—and imprisoned in the hold of our own ship.*
>
> *They should have killed us. Within an hour, Ganubi had managed to slip his bonds and untie us. We recovered our gear and headed for the deck—and now, we hide behind the wheelhouse as Ganubi pokes his head around the corner, surveying the scene.*

"You see four of the fish-men standing near the mast, about thirty feet away," Morgan says during one of our weekly game nights.

"They carry big, jagged-tipped spears and seem to be having a conversation, though you can't understand their language. It sounds like a bubbling, half-clogged drain."

Ganubi pauses, turns, and grins back at us. I know the look on his face, and it worries me.

  "Stay right here," he says. "I've got an idea."

Ganubi is a "bard," one of the more obscure character classes in Dungeons & Dragons. Bards express magic powers through the use of music or performance, sort of like the Pied Piper. Many players avoid the class, preferring to play something more traditional, like a fighter or thief. But there's nothing traditional about Phil.

Phillip Gerba, thirty-one, is a professional clown. He earned a bachelor's degree in theater performance from Northern Arizona University and studied for a year at the Clown Conservatory in San Francisco. After graduation he worked on Royal Caribbean cruise ships as a juggler, and then moved to New York and got a job at the big Disney store in midtown Manhattan. He wore a Goofy suit and did pratfalls to amuse kids.

At the moment, Phil's developing his own stage show, *Onomatopoeia*. It's high-concept vaudeville: Each scene explores an idea, but the only words in the script are onomatopoeias. It's heavy on the slapstick: Bang! Pop! Thud! Sigh.

Phil started playing D&D when he was just a child. "I really wanted to play a lizard man because I liked lizards," he says. "I wanted to be a herpetologist when I grew up." Instead, he went into theater—and now the game table is one more place for him to perform.

D&D players control their characters using a combination of first-person narration and dramatic performance. This is the part of the

game that confuses people who've never played. But it's fairly simple, in practice.

Imagine you're playing a character who is locked in a jail cell. The DM describes the room, from his notes: "You're in the corner of a cold, dark room, about ten feet square. The walls are made of stone and are only interrupted by a single wooden door. The door is shut tightly, and a fist-sized window near the top is your only source of light."

As a player, your job is to choose an action and describe it. You might say, "I try to force the door open."

At this, the DM looks up the rules for breaking down a door,* consults your character sheet to see how strong you are, and rolls a couple dice. If you're lucky, he'll say something like "You put all your weight against the door, and a hinge snaps. The door falls out into the hallway with a loud crash."

This narrative technique is useful in most situations. But what if you weren't strong enough to break the door? You might try to talk a guard into releasing you—and your DM might require you to act the scenario out, in character, with him playing the guard. Put on a convincing performance, and he'll open the door.

For players like Phil, this is the best part of the game. He comes to life when our characters are haggling with merchants, negotiating with employers, or trying to talk their way out of a fight.

Ganubi's plans are always dramatic, but not as often successful, so I have my reservations. But he's already turned the corner and pulled out a trinket we obtained in Tokyo: his hat of disguise, a magical item that allows the wearer to change appearance at will.

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* Table 3–17: Random Door Types, *Dungeon Master's Guide,* page 78.

He puts it on his head, and his features warp and twist, his skin turns scaly, and his face goes flat. In a moment, he looks like one of the pirates.

"Okay, you look like a fish," Morgan says.

Phil flashes a large grin. "I'm going to approach the pirates and see what they do."

Morgan rolls a die, hidden behind the cover of his notebook. "They turn and notice you but don't take any action. You're still about thirty feet away."

"Right." Phil pauses. "When I get about five feet away, I'm going to act surprised, point behind them, and yell in alarm."

"You don't speak their language."

"I know," says Phil. "I make a noise like a panicked fish."

Morgan chuckles and then grimaces. "Okay," he says. "Roll against your performance skill."

Phil picks up a d20—a glittery blue plastic die, twenty-sided—and rolls it across the table. It stops showing a seven.

Morgan checks his notes. "The pirates look confused," he says. "They're just staring at you."

"Okay," says Phil. "Which fish looks the most gullible?"

Alex grunts, exasperated. "To hell with this," he says. "I draw my swords."

Jhaden is the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in our adventuring party, a ranger who fights with one sword in each hand on the front line of battle. He does the majority of damage to enemies and serves as a meat shield for other, less hardy characters.

He's played by Alex Agius, thirty-three. Alex is a graphic designer, working freelance since he was laid off from a full-time job at *Penthouse*

magazine. It used to be his job to lay out pictorials, Photoshop blemishes off nude models, and select the proper font for each obscene caption. Now he mostly works for a magazine about investment banking.

Alex was first exposed to D&D when he turned nine years old and a cousin brought the game to his birthday party. "I loved the Conan comic books, so what initially attracted me to D&D was that you could be a barbarian," he says. "But when I realized that I could play a character that was totally my design, instead of a pre-created character like Conan . . . that was really cool."

After his cousin went home, Alex sketched a map of the dungeon they'd explored in the game. When his mom found the drawing, she "thought it was really cool," so she bought him a set of D&D rule books.

Unlike Phil, Alex tends to get restless when there's too much roleplaying in a game. He's much more comfortable when the adventure tends toward action.

Combat in D&D is handled as a sequence of narrated actions and lots of dice rolling. If a player decides to hit something with his sword, he may announce the attack, but the DM calculates whether it succeeds. In practice, this amounts to calculating an algebraic equation, something like: (strength of the fighter + skill of the fighter) − (agility of the target + armor worn by the target) + an element of randomness introduced by the dice = whether or not the fighter hits.

Every creature in the game—whether a character controlled by a player or a monster controlled by the DM—has a specific amount of "hit points," a number representing their health. When a fighter hits his target, he rolls dice to see how much it hurts, with higher numbers indicating more damage. The DM subtracts that number from the monster's pool of hit points, and the process repeats. Player after player takes their shots until the monster hits zero hit points and dies.

These rules for combat get incredibly complex. There are specific

rules for fighting while blinded, while underwater, and while riding a horse. There are rules that describe how to knock a sword out of someone's hands and how to bash them with a shield. There is even an entire rule book, *Weapons of Legacy,* listing hundreds of different armaments and describing the effect they have upon the game.

> *Jhaden's sword, Bloodlust, is an epic weapon, magically enchanted to inflict extra damage against vampires and other undead creatures. He wields it in his right hand, and in his left he holds a shorter blade, a foot long and unnaturally sharp. If he comes at you with both, you're going to get hurt.*

"I'm charging," Alex says. "This guy." He points at an inch-high plastic figurine on the table, representing one of the fish. Morgan has set them up on our battle mat, a piece of tan vinyl printed with a twenty-by-twenty grid of one-inch squares. Each square corresponds to five feet of space in the game world, and every participant in a battle is represented by a different miniature figurine, or "mini." We don't use it all the time in the game, but it's helpful during combat because it allows us to track each other's location and movement.

"The guards see you, and now it's time for initiative order," says Morgan. Any time players enter combat, they roll a die to determine the order in which they'll take their turns. This time, Alex comes up first.

"Okay, I charge in, and I'm attacking with Bloodlust," he says. He moves his mini—a crouching figure in a brown cloak, holding two swords—across the mat, picks up a d20, and rolls it to determine the success of his attack. It comes up 12. "I get plus two for charging, and plus eight for my melee attack bonus, so my attack roll is a twenty-two."

Jhaden rushes forward, and Bloodlust slashes through the pirate's scales, penetrating deep into its chest. As he pulls the sword from his victim, Jhaden looks back at us and shouts, "Tonight we're eating sushi!"

A Dungeons & Dragons campaign almost always includes a wizard. Abel was our first. He was an "evoker," which denotes a specialization in spells that create something from nothing—like fireballs and lightning bolts. But he was killed just a few weeks ago, when his consciousness was merged with that of an ancient dragon.* Since wizards are so critical to an adventuring party's success, we quickly recruited a new one, Babeal.

Both characters are played by Brandon Bryant. It would be simple to typecast Brandon as a D&D player—he's a big guy with unruly hair who works as an IT manager. But the easy stereotypes end there. At thirty-four, he's on his second marriage, to a recent art school graduate. He's studied karate since he was a kid and regularly travels to competitions around the Northeast. He's also an expert fire dancer—on warm summer nights in Brooklyn, you can sometimes find him on the roof of his apartment building, tossing and catching flaming batons.

Brandon's happy to draw a direct line from his fire dancing to spell casting. "I like the idea of having control over an elemental force," he says. "Here's this primal thing and I'm bending it to my will . . . it's magical but mundane, like having tea with a god."

"The pirate has been badly wounded by Jhaden's attack but is still standing," says Morgan. "Babeal, it's your turn."

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*It's a long story. Suffice it to say that if we ever manage to rid the earth of vampires, the next world-killing peril we'll have to deal with is a badass flying serpent with a raging case of multiple personality disorder.

The mini representing Babeal is at the far end of the battle mat, where Morgan has drawn a box with a brown dry-erase marker, indicating the walls of the ship's wheelhouse. It's a figure of a man in a forest-green robe, holding a long staff and wearing a bucket-shaped helmet with long antlers curving upward on each side. This mini has always reminded me of the leader of the "Knights who say Ni" from the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail,* but I have never made this observation aloud. Making a Python reference in a room full of geeks is like bringing brownies to a Weight Watchers meeting. It could take hours to restore order.

Jhaden is across the grid, in a square next to the wounded pirate. The three other fish-men are a few squares away.

"Suck on this, fishies," says Brandon. "Fireball."

Morgan nods. A fireball is a ranged attack spell, so Babeal can cast it from a distance. And since it has a distinct area of effect—a circle forty feet in diameter, or eight squares on the grid—Babeal can target it so as to immolate the pirates but miss his allies.

Morgan draws a red circle on the mat. "You cast and the deck explodes in flame, engulfing the pirates. Roll for damage."

A fireball spell causes worlds of hurt, so Babeal needs to roll ten six-sided dice (in geekspeak, "10d6") to find out how many hit points each pirate loses.

He doesn't have enough dice, though. So he picks 5d6 off the table—three of his own, and two of Alex's—tosses them on the table, scoops them up, and tosses them again. Each affected enemy will take 32 points of damage.

Brandon's fireballs do 10d6 of damage now, but when our game began, he couldn't cast the spell at all. That's changed because of a

key element of the D&D rules: Characters don't just persist from session to session, they learn from their experiences.

Anyone who has played a video game in the last twenty years won't find that shocking. But D&D pioneered the idea of characters that become more powerful over time; before its invention, games were almost all static. The rules of Monopoly never change, no matter how many times you go around the board.*

Because D&D characters can grow, like real people, playing the game becomes a uniquely visceral experience. Participants are more motivated to succeed, since victories are accumulative. They experience greater joy from those successes, since they are more emotionally invested. And they know the thrill of real danger, since no one wants to lose a character they've spent years building.

In short, D&D players live vicariously through their characters the way a parent might live through their children—not that any gamer would take the relationship that seriously, unless they're crazy. But more on that later.

Naturally, advancement is measured in terms of a mathematical progression. At various points in an adventure, usually during breaks in the narrative, a DM will review the players' accomplishments and reward them with "experience points." They'll get points for every monster they've defeated, based on their relative threat; killing a rat might earn 100 experience points, while slaying a dragon could be worth 100,000. They'll also, at the DM's discretion, receive points for abstract achievements, like solving a puzzle or successfully role-playing their way out of trouble. When a character has earned enough experience points they advance a level, gain access to new abilities, and become more powerful.

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*Just imagine if the battleship eventually gained the ability to fire its cannons and blow the thimble to pieces.

The characters aren't the only thing changing over time. Since D&D campaigns can last months, years, or even decades, players will come and go as their personal lives allow more or less opportunity for leisure.

Vampire World has seen its share of personnel changes. Brandon's friend Nick played a barbarian, Taluug, until he moved out of the apartment. A second Alex (we called him "Deuce") had a few characters, including a druid, a magic-user who draws his powers from nature. Deuce was a college student and quit because of school obligations.

R. C. Robbins joined the game well after Abel, Jhaden, Ganubi, and Weslocke met in Kyoto. He plays Graeme, a rogue. They're an essential part of any adventuring party; skills like finding traps and picking locks are frequently useful in the fantasy-adventure genre. But since R. C. didn't make the game tonight, we consider Graeme "in pocket"—he hasn't died or left the party, he's just off in the background until next time. It's a shame, because we could use a little help with these pirates: Babeal's fireball scorched them but didn't take them down.

Now it's my turn. Weslocke is a cleric, and, like Babeal, he's capable of casting powerful spells. Many of them are focused on healing—in any adventuring party, the cleric often plays the role of medic. But I've got a few haymakers as well.

I pick up my mini (a man in silver plate armor, holding a heavy flanged mace) and move it five squares toward the pirates. I'm still allowed to take an action after moving, so I check my character sheet and then pick up a d20.

"I cast Searing Light on this pirate," I tell Morgan, pointing at a figure, and then roll the die: 17, more than high enough to confirm the

hit. The spell incurs one eight-sided die's (or 1d8) worth of damage per two caster levels; I'm a twelfth-level cleric, so I scrounge around the table to find six eight-sided dice. I roll and sum the numbers: 41 hit points' worth of damage.

"A blast of light shoots from your palm, like a ray of the sun," says Morgan. "It strikes the pirate and he withers and dies." Alex cackles. I smirk.

I named Weslocke after one of the very first D&D characters I ever played. I was ten years old, in fourth grade, and impossibly nerdy: I wore trousers, black socks, and thick glasses to my magnet school for gifted children.

By that age, I'd already been sucked into many of the classic 1980s nerd interests, including *Star Wars,* computer programming, and listening to Weird Al Yankovic. But I hadn't explored the realms of fantasy literature any deeper than *The Chronicles of Narnia* and was only dimly aware of role-playing games. So when my friend Scott Johnson produced a beat-up copy of the Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set, it was a revelation: In this world, I wasn't a "neo maxi zoom dweebie" in JCPenney slacks. I was an ass-kicking, dungeon-crawling, goblin-slaying epic hero.

I wasn't alone. In the decade following its 1974 debut, D&D grew from an obscure hobby into a worldwide phenomenon—one of the most passionately loved, bestselling, and most controversial games ever made. It dominated my preteen years and became the center of my most important social interactions; my best friends were the guys I played D&D with. When we got together for one of our frequent Saturday-night sleepovers, sometimes we'd watch a movie, sometimes we'd go swimming, sometimes we'd throw firecrackers at each

other or ignite pools of lighter fluid in Scott's driveway—but we'd always play D&D.

It's the pirates' turn now, so Morgan takes over the action. After my spell fried their comrade, the pirates decided I'm their biggest threat, so Morgan moves their minis to surround me—one in front, and two on either side. They attack with their spears, and two connect. Suddenly, I'm down to only 55 of my 82 hit points.

Everyone in the fight has made a move, so the initiative order starts again from the top. Jhaden pivots and hacks at one of the pirates but doesn't drop him. Ganubi falls back, draws his bow, and fires an arrow, which misses. Babeal zaps one with a Magic Missile spell, but only for 16 hit points.

I decide to get clever. I announce to the table that I'm casting a spell, Blade Barrier, which summons an immobile curtain of whirling blades into existence. I evoke this barrier, I explain, in a circle directly around Weslocke: the eight squares on the grid bordering my own, three of which are currently occupied by pirates.

Morgan will have to roll high for each pirate to successfully dodge the blades and back out of the curtain. If they don't, they're going to be chum.

He tosses the dice. One dies instantly, shredded by the blades. Another makes his roll and jumps backward, taking no damage. The third also dodges successfully—but instead of pushing his mini away from mine, Morgan picks up the figure and drops it right in my square.

"The pirate jumps forward to escape the blades and crashes into you," he explains. "You both collapse to the ground."

I have trapped myself inside a cage of whirling knives with a raging fish monster.

Playing D&D might be uniquely rewarding, but it's not always easy. Role-playing games carry a lot of baggage, and devotees run the risk of being branded as nerds, weirdos—or even criminals.

To be fair, this prejudice has some root in reality. The game does tend to attract fans of fantasy literature, mythology, mathematics, and puzzles—in other words, nerds. They value the community they find among D&D players and strive to be welcoming to others; the game table becomes a place where outcasts can feel comfortable. It's admirable, but it does the hobby no favors in the PR department.

I don't know if I played D&D because other kids my age thought I was a nerd, or if they thought I was a nerd because I played D&D. Causation and correlation tend to get confused when some hormone-addled thirteen-year-old bully is threatening to sew your ass to your elbow. What I do know is that I had it easy. I played D&D as much as I wanted and put up with only occasional teasing: Other kids were forbidden to play the game and ostracized when they did.

In the 1980s, D&D found itself at the center of a massive hysteria. The game was linked to murders, satanic rituals, and teen suicides. Schools banned it; churches demonized it; courts criminalized it. Law enforcement officials would report that a suspect "was known to play D&D" the same way they might reveal he tortured animals or was a serious drug addict.

I never wavered in my love of D&D, though I did see other games. As we entered our angsty teenage years, my friends and I spent increasing amounts of time with D&D's children: role-playing games that stepped out of the fantasy genre to emulate spy thrillers (Top Secret), science fiction (Star Trek: The Role Playing Game), and whatever it is you'd call Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles & Other Strangeness.

OF DICE AND MEN

We were particularly fond of postapocalyptic games like Cyber-punk 2020, which belong to a genre inspired by authors like William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. In high school we spent hundreds of hours playing Shadowrun, a futuristic game that brilliantly combined sci-fi with classic D&D elements. The game imagined an apocalypse caused by the return of magic, instead of warfare or disease: It had trolls on motorbikes, elven computer hackers, and an ancient blue dragon named Dunkelzahn who got elected president.

In practice, Shadowrun played something like *Blade Runner* meets *Conan the Barbarian*. My favorite character was a wizard who could shoot a gun with one hand and cast fireball spells with the other. I sat in a friend's basement and played that character on almost every Saturday night of my high school senior year.

A magic-user controls arcane energies through an act of pure will, so I can dismiss Weslocke's blade barrier just as easily as I summoned it. But not until my next turn. For now, I have to wait, and right now, it's the pirate's turn.

He bites for 11 points of damage, and then Morgan gets a funny look on his face. "Roll against your willpower score," he instructs me. "The pirate has a special attack."

I pick up my favorite d20 and toss it on the mat. Four.

"Sorry," Morgan says, though he is clearly not apologizing. "Wes-locke is frozen in fear for the next five turns. You can't take any actions, including casting or dismissing spells."

I lie inside my magic cage, cowering, while the monster tears at me with his claws. He digs under my armor and rips through my clothes, slashing my skin in dozens of places. Outside, Babeal, Ganubi, and Jhaden dispatch the other pirates, but reinforcements arrive from belowdecks.

*And even if they weren't occupied, they couldn't help me without being
shredded by the barrier.*

I can feel my life force bleeding out of me. I'm going to die.

By the time I reached college I had become conflicted about my identity as a role-playing geek. Sure, the games were awesome, but I worried about ghettoizing myself in a world of dice and fantasy.

I didn't know anyone at my new school, so my first week on campus I went to two club meetings with hopes of making friends. One was the Science Fiction Forum, a sort of nerd fraternity where members watched videotaped episodes of *The X-Files,* played D&D, and argued about whether the starship *Enterprise* could defeat an Imperial Star Destroyer in a dogfight. The other club was the *Press,* the school's alternative newspaper. It was full of self-styled revolutionaries who smoked clove cigarettes, drank Belgian beer, and thought they were Hunter S. Thompson.

After a few weeks, I quit the Forum and dedicated myself to the *Press*. The women were better looking.

From there I began distancing myself from my nerd heritage. I spent most of my free time in the *Press* office, writing articles and arguing about politics. I only played one game of D&D during my freshman year, at a friend of a friend's off-campus apartment. But I felt embarrassed about it and never returned.

In retrospect, I had merely replaced one geeky habit with another: Only a D&D nerd would think he'd become cool by working on a school newspaper. Still, I managed to cultivate an air of hipster superiority. We were definitely not nerds, oh no; we didn't spend our weekends playing D&D in someone's parents' basement, we spent them arguing about politics in the student union basement.

In the spring of my freshman year, the campus hosted an annual

science fiction and gaming convention. I attended under the aegis
of a reporter and pretended to look down my nose at the weirdos.
When I realized some of the convention's dealers would pay good
money for old hardback D&D rule books, I had my parents ship mine
to me overnight and sold them for beer money.

I wouldn't play again for more than a decade.

There's one round left until the fear effect wears off, and I've got only
8 hit points. Things look grim for Weslocke the Cleric.

There are three pirates on the deck, including the angry one on
top of me. On my turn, I cower. Then the pirate gets his attack. I can
barely stand to look as Morgan throws the die.

"He hits," says Morgan. He picks up two six-sided dice to roll the
damage. They skitter across the table and come up 3 and 3.

All five guys around the table groan in unison, a sound of relief
and disbelief. "All right," says Morgan. "You've got two hit points left,
and the fear is gone, so next round, you can take an action."

Jhaden skewers one of the pirates with Bloodlust, killing him. Ganubi
finishes off the second with a flurry of arrows. Finally, I feel my courage
return. I drop the blade barrier and scramble away from my attacker.
He pursues but moves slowly and can't close the distance.

Jhaden's turn. Alex gives me a hard look. "I'm charging," he says,
"and declaring a power attack for five points."

Power attacks are one of Jhaden's special abilities, requiring him
to subtract points from his roll to hit an opponent. It makes it harder
to hit the target—but if the attack is successful, he adds those points
to its damage. It's a desperation move. Alex rolls the die.

Jhaden's blades go snicker-snack. The hit connects. The last pirate crumples to the deck.

Morgan shuts his notebook. *"And that's it for this week,"* he says.

I grew up, got a job as a reporter, put on a jacket and tie, and didn't think much about D&D. So did thousands of other gamers: Dungeons & Dragons faded as an object of nerd obsession, replaced by video games and the Internet.

But then something happened. Players started picking up the game again—and this time, they weren't hiding in their parents' basement. In August 2012, more than forty-one thousand men, women, and children descended on Indianapolis for the D&D-heavy Gen Con gaming convention—the biggest crowd in its forty-five-year history. In San Francisco, gamers show up on Market Street and repurpose outdoor chess tables for open-to-the-public D&D sessions. In New York, trendy bars and coffee shops host D&D nights. In London, they play at hundred-year-old pubs.

What happened? People who grew up playing Dungeons & Dragons remembered how much fun they had. D&D offers a unique form of entertainment, a communal storytelling that's more interactive than video games, more engrossing than TV or film, and more social than books. It's hard for people who've experienced that to stay away for too long.

The D&D players of the eighties matured to a point where they recognize, and value, how the game shaped their lives. Above all else, Dungeons & Dragons is a social game, and for many players, it was the tool that helped them form friendships that have lasted a lifetime. It's also a game defined by performance, where players live vicariously through their characters. As such, it's responsible for a kind of

resurgent atavism. We fight and win and live or die along with the members of our gaming group. D&D players are our clan.

That's why, after more than a decade clean, I picked up my dice bag and responded to a Craigslist ad seeking players for a new D&D campaign. It will make a good story, I told myself. I hoped to justify the lost hours of my youth by approaching the game as a journalist and reporting on the phenomenon with the advantage of insider experience. And I didn't worry about getting sucked back into the world of swords and sorcerers, even if my friends and girlfriend did: I'm an editor at *Forbes* now, I bragged, an award-winning journalist, not an impressionable kid in a *Conan the Barbarian* T-shirt.

I was wrong. Before long, I was in over my head. Sure, I did witness the revival of the game and met lots of normal people who play D&D the same way they might join a weekly poker game. But I didn't expect the game to change my life. I didn't anticipate making new friends—good ones—and coming to terms with the way I relate to other people. Returning to D&D forced me to redefine my self-image, reexamine my childhood, and change the way I look at the world. And after a while, I wasn't just a reporter writing about people who play Dungeons & Dragons. I was one of them.

Now I know magic.