

The Brooklyn Strategist is a game shop that's a 20-minute walk from my apartment. The shop is full of kids playing role-playing games during the day but after 7 o' clock, the place fills up with grown-ups – although most of them were still younger than me.

Walking in, I felt a little weird saying I'd like to learn Dungeons & Dragons, but the staff was really awesome. The first thing I had to do was build a character. So this guy named Keino asked me, what do you want to be? Dwarf, elf, human? What does he do? Is he a fighter, a sorcerer, a cleric? I was like – wait, a what? So they asked, okay, who is your favorite character anywhere? I said Batman. After some debate, they decided the closest Batman-like character to create for me in the D&D world is a monk.

*KEINO: Arlin, maybe you can help me, a good race for a monk?*

*ARLIN: Usually a Halfling. Halfling monk, human.*

***What's a Halfling?***

*KEINO: Little mini creature, Frodo.*

*ARLIN: Yeah, I would pick a human or Halfling person.*

***So what's the benefit of being plain old human?***

*ARLIN: So humans can have plus one to all attributes, because they don't have magic spells like a druid does, but human they get plus one to everything and that can change your stats pretty significantly.*

***Since I'm completely start out new a human would be a good starting point, good training wheels?***

*ARLIN: Human is best thing, a human fighter base class.*

*KEINO: The best in any.*

***I'm very familiar with humans too.***

I didn't realize, I had to name my character – and they kept asking all night, what's his name? Finally, Azrahn popped in my head. It started out as Azriel because he filled in for Bruce Wayne when Bane broke his back in the '90s – but Azriel was also the evil cat in The Smurfs, so I thought I'd altered it to Azharn.

Azrahn was chaotic good – meaning he'll do the right thing when he has to. His training is The Way of the Four Elements, which allows him to do some Earthy spells. But looking back, I wish I had chosen a character who had a lot more magical abilities because I forgot how useless Batman can be when he goes into a magical realm with the Justice League.

The next thing that was hard for me to keep track was there are six different type of dice -- from four sides to twenty sides. They started rolling them to figure out the numbers that will define my character. Strength is different from constitution. Intelligence is different than wisdom. The main thing I wanted for Azrahn was dexterity because I'm clumsy in real life.

Finally, I was ready to start playing. Our dungeon master or DM for short was Tim. He sits at the center of the table behind a stack of books with a detailed history of this world, and suggested scenario for him to run through with the players

First he tells us that our group has come across these nasty pirates holding the locals captive. Tim asked what I wanted to do. I didn't realize my choices were going to be that open ended. I said, okay, I want to make sure the hostages were okay. He says they are. But this isn't a humanitarian game. I've built a character that is a badass fighter. What is his first move? So I was still thinking cautiously and I said, I want to run up to a higher level to get a better look at the pirates and survey the threat. He said okay. Roll the twenty-sided dice.

*TIM: So roll and add plus four and don't roll badly, this is badly.*

**I rolled very badly.**

*TIM: You rolled a one. The one is the lowest on a D20, 20 means something awesome, and a 1 something bad happened, you were like hold on, I'll cut them up, run up stairs, running out and as you run up to door, pop head out, you trip and you stumble out on to the wall here, there was a little body lying against the wall, as you were trying to sneak out it slipped and fell off the roof and the entire crew looked up at you and went, gasp!*

**Then Tim rolled to see how the bad guys to see how they reacted.**

*TIM: So let's see, this is for the captain.*

**It was another low number.**

*TOM: He wasn't paying attention, he looked up and his crew was like we saw him up here! Saw who?*

**This was a revelation for me. I tried writing screenplays for years. I spent a lot of money on classes and textbooks, but I never would've written a scene like that, where I've set up this super fast, stealthy character and on his first move, he trips -- alerts the bad guys and embarrasses himself in front of his new crew. But it wasn't my choice or Tim's choice really. It was the roll of the dice that dictated the story.**

LG: The random static and chaos of every day life didn't intrude into those fantasy worlds, but Dungeons & Dragons introduced it, they put it into that, and they created a fantasy world that behaves in some ways more like our world does.

**Lev Grossman wrote the Magicians trilogy, a series of novel that imagines a Harry Potter type world where there is no Voldemort, so there are no clear moral guidelines around using magic. The Syfy network is adapting his books into a series.**

**Of course, Lev played a lot of D&D as a kid, and one of the things he finds inspirational about the game is the fact that there's nothing there but dice, maybe a map drawn on graph paper, and a pile of encyclopedic books. The rest of the fantasy is happening in our heads.**

LG: When you write fantasy novels you're conscious that unlike a movie or a TV show, you're showing everything, there's evocative music playing in the background all the time, when you're a novelist you have very tiny crude building blocks -- namely words -- to build up this fantasy universe. Dungeons & Dragons did that to some extent in the same way, your tools are very simple and crude and it asks a lot of the players.

**The game may be called Dungeons & Dragons, but it borrows shamelessly from every other mythology -- and that inspired Lev Grossman's novels.**

LG: When I was designing the magic school in my books called Breakbills, what curriculum would be like, who faculty should be, I immediately knew it had to be highly multi-cultural, bringing in magic traditions and smash under one roof that's what would happen, magic means something slightly different and that's what D&D did too.

***Yeah my monk character got bit by a werewolf, after built this character I didn't expect him to be a werewolf but now he is.***

LG: That must be a shocking development.

***(Laughs) It was.***

LG: It's very funny the way D&D handles this stuff. I gave a lecture this year, and I was talking about origins of fantasy, you know for CS Lewis it was, one of the things that spurred him to write fantasy was an encounter with poem by Longfellow about the Norse god Balder, and I was thinking when I did I encounter Balder? It was in the Deities and Demigods hand book, and I saw a very different treatment, Longfellow left out his armor class and hit points.

**Someone please write a parody of that Longfellow poem which includes Balder the Beautiful's armor class and hit points.**

**Another innovation D&D brought to the craft of fiction writing: imagining sorcery on a budget.**

LG: This is something fantasy novelists do routinely now but they didn't do it back in the day, which is to think about things like economics and money and currently how they worked, you never had a sense in Narnia or Middle Earth there's a working economy happening in the background, Lewis and Tolkien weren't concerned with that, but Dungeons & Dragons treated it a very not just realistic but in a realist way, you had to make a budget. Likewise the way the magic worked. When Gandalf wanted to do a spell, he had a staff, waved it around, something exciting happened, but you never had an orderly system. Dungeons & Dragons rationalized all that in radical way, suddenly these questions had answers, if you want to cast spell, what level are you? What materials do you have to have on hand? Are you talking? Are you waiving your arms? It was very specific in the way that novelists describe things, especially the way novelists describe things, especially the way novelist describe things now.

**Tolkien was innovative in the way he included maps of Middle Earth in the Lord of the Rings books. But:**

LG: Dungeons & Dragons took it seriously in a way other writers didn't, these maps were to scale, they gridded out, you knew where step and not step, very clear and literal and worked out to the last millimeter in this wonderfully rigorous almost scientific way that was very new and I think has influenced a lot of writers.

*PLAYER: I killed off the guy with 25 damage right?*

*TIM: 21 damage.*

*PLAYER: So you're going to make 5D10.*

**Meanwhile, back at the Brooklyn Strategist, I was getting the hang of things. After a few hours, my character made his first kill – with a dart.**

*TIM: Four points of damage plus four he goes down, nicely done. Describe your kill.*

***Oh nice! When it went in the air, it made this awesome – tssspt. And went into his forehead and moment of shock before he fell backwards with a thud.***

*PLAYERS: Awesome! Very cool!*

**Tim was a great dungeon master – which is not easy. I know people who had terrible experiences as kids because there was that one frenemy who kept killing off everyone's characters. You need a managerial mind, a head for numbers, like the future executive Richard Velasquez.**

RV: The way I specifically manage, I'm a really hands off manager, you give people responsibility they rise to it, so I'd take a break from DM and offer it up to one of the characters, do you want to DM? Give them the opportunity to see other side of the table, because it's easy to criticize DM until you have to sit in that role, come up with story, manage character, manage players, it gives them a better appreciation of that role so when you're back in the player's seat, they don't give you such a hard time.

***You sound like you were a very mature teenager.***

RV: I actually was, a lot of people told me that.

***I knew kids like you, so I'm not like I don't buy that.***

RV: Yeah, I knew them too and many of them were my friends.

**Over the next two months, I tried playing with different dungeon masters at the Brooklyn Strategist. The experience was radically different each time. One of DMs was ALL about combat, which means it was all about the**

numbers. When I listened back to the tape -- we sounded like actuaries or bookies.

#### MONTAGE OF PLAYERS AND DM CALLING OUT STAT NUMBERS

I noticed that the story of our battles also changed depending on the personality of the players.

One night, there was a teenage kid in our group. He decided his character was a douche – his words; and he thought that was hilarious. So we came across a group of fire worshipers. The adults playing the game wanted to do on a recon mission to figure out who they were. But this kid walked up to the bad guys and insulted them. They struck back hard. For the rest of the night we were desperately fighting to stay alive. One of the guys in the group said to the teenager that he didn't hate him, but his character did. The kid looked so shaken, I thought was going to cry.

But then I started to wonder – am I coming at this late? Can I really have the full D&D experience if I start as a middle-aged adult. I think everyone at the game shop starting playing when they were teenagers -- like Lev Grossman did.

LG: And I think of who we were, young male adolescents in the crucible of figuring out who we were there's a lot of pathos to remember us doing that, creating people over and over again and figuring out who they were, because that's what we were trying to do in real life.

PLF: We were playing at being grown-ups in order to be friends. We were playing at a version of grown ups which has very little to do with actually being grown ups, but to remain friends and survive the pressure of not being grown ups.

**In fact, Paul LeFarge thinks D&D isn't really a game. It's more of a ritual.**

PLF: And more specifically a rite of passage, a group of unassociated adolescents to form a unit and find some kind of collective identity.

***Oh, you mean like a quest for a fellowship.***

PLF: Yeah, like the fellowship of the ring. Yeah, I think that's right the irony being for us what was the ring was power turned out to be girls, so we were like now we found that, now the fellowship can disband because we'll go on to the next thing because this is obviously more fun than rolling dice and eating chips.

**All these guys stopped playing after college. But Paul LaFarge kept thinking about how D&D had influenced him. So he pitched a story to a magazine called *The Believer* where he would track down Gary Gygax, the “father of role playing games,” who co-created *Dungeons & Dragons* back in the ‘70s.**

PLF: Gary Gygax was a rules light person in a lot of ways. He was a smoker. He was a drinker. He certainly had his womanizing days when he lived in Beverly Hills in the early ‘80s. He was someone who was very happy to be alive and he was very warm and gracious person because of that. And he loved people who knew who he was, who doesn’t want to be adored? Who doesn’t want to think of themselves as *The Wizard* and have people make pilgrimages to meet him?

**After a long day of interviewing Gary Gygax at his home, Gygax offered to Dungeon Master a game with Paul.**

PLF: He came out of the war gaming world which was very much strategy based and he played D&D as if it were a war game, he posed problems to the players and there were better and worse solutions and had very little compunction of killing characters off if the occasion warranted, and his thought was if you play smart you win and if you don’t you’re very likely to lose and now let’s sit down and see how you play.

***But it sounds like you were slightly disappointed, were you more interested in the characters?***

PLF: No, it was great because as a kid if somebody had waved their magic wand over me when I was 11 and said poof you are in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin and here’s Gary Gygax and he’s running a game of D&D, here’s your seat at the table, go. Which would’ve been possible because he loved to Dungeon Master and he ran games at conventions, but if it happened then I would’ve been disappointed, I would’ve lost, I wouldn’t have gotten into problem solving aspect of it, and there wouldn’t be room for the part I liked and I would’ve felt frustrated. But to meet him in the context of doing this as a grown up it was kind of perfect I was if Gary were saying hey this is about reality now, here’s a problem, see if you can solve it. You don’t get into the theatrics of being an elf, because who cares about the theatrics of being an elf? You’re not an elf.

**I ended up playing at *The Brooklyn Strategist* for two months. Some nights I showed up stressed or depressed – and playing D&D for three hours was cathartic. By the end, I felt pure joy -- like in the final round, when we faced**

a ginormous red dragon. Arlin – who helped my character months ago -- was our Dungeon Master. We were getting our asses kicked, trying to figure out how to stop this thing. And I remembered one of the few spells that I had.

***Can I make the dragon with stillness of mind?***

*ARLIN: Yes! Okay, this is for a special roll, big dragon, you cast your hands up, your hands are shaking as you try and cast this spell.*

***Ugh! Three!***

*ARLIN: You can help him.*

She was turning to this very mature 10-year old kid who was staying up late, playing us. He was a monk as well, so he cast the same spell – stillness of mind -- and rolled high.

*ARLIN: The dragon begins to calm down, and he rolls you with his snout wondering what happened?*

***Aw! Can we pet the dragon?***

*ARLIN: I don't know it's a red dragon, so how long before it gets bored and – Okay.*

In a weird way, I think playing D&D did help me think about approaching problems in a new way. If I had to convince someone to do something at work, I'd imagine how many charisma points do I have? Roll the dice. If I roll badly, well, figure out a new strategy.

I still wish I got more attached to my character better. Despite was the man who created Dungeons & Dragon said, I do care about the theatrics of being an elf, or a monk, at least for a couple hours.

So I'm joining a private D&D group, where the adventures are going to be more character driven, less about combat. I'm still chasing that high. I hope I'm not too late.