

A Time to Pretend: Dungeons and Dragons and Friendship

by Charles Marvel

“ How a tabletop role playing game brought my friends and I closer together, and helped our shared fantasies become real”



When we last left our heroes they had managed to kill the murderous witch Morgantha. They had decided to ambush the head of the coven alone for fear of what additional powers she had when with her daughters. They waited in the woods surrounding the old cobblestone road she commuted everyday from her home to a local village. The group's Paladin, Erebos, had set a magical series of runes on the road to trap the old witch. After she unknowingly stepped into the trap she was forced to fight the party since she could not simply teleport away or even run to escape the Magic Circle. Thanks to our heroes' preparation the party was able to deal with the old witch rather easily, but now they had two more witches to deal with. Most witches are found in covens of three. They may have taken out the head witch but Morgantha's daughters had to be taken out as well.

A few hours later our heroes stood at the home of the trio of witches, a dilapidated windmill known to locals as the Old' Bonegrinder. It was here that the trio of witches baked their special Dream Pies. Pies that the party was horrified to discover contained meat not from wild game but from the local villagers. The windmill stood, jutting into the grey sky, the light beginning to fade as night approached. The heroes steeled their nerves and readied their weapons. They broke through the door and immediately attacked the two witches. Morgantha may have been the most powerful witch of the trio but her daughters, Bella and Ophelia, had a number of additional advantages.

Spells in the form of songs were cast, blades were swung with righteous and holy fury, and bullets flew through the air towards their targets. It was a long, grueling, and difficult fight. It was an encounter in which our heroes had many close calls with death, a battle that our heroes almost did not survive, but they were victorious. It was in this battle that the party of heroes fully resolved themselves to a new goal. To band together and fight the evil monsters wherever they found them. Our three heroes, Erebos: a Paladin cursed with lycanthropy, Voltaire: a draconic Gunslinger with a dark past, and Brushstroke: a swashbuckling Bard dealing with a demonic bloodline, knew they must protect the people who are terrorized by these vile creatures... or die trying.

The story above is one that came from a campaign of Dungeons and Dragons, a tabletop role playing game that I was a part of with my friends. We would meet together for four hours, every Friday. We played in the basement of my home. My friends were the main characters of the story. I was the Dungeon Master of the game, meaning that I was essentially the narrator of the story we would create together. I would describe a scene to the players, some that I had come up with earlier some that I made up as the game went along, and they would figure out how best

to solve it; I would pretend to be and narrate the various characters they met along the way, I was also a referee who made sure the rules of the game were followed (less by the letter and more by the spirit). Whenever the characters had to perform an action they would narrate what they were doing to me, the Dungeon Master. Then they would roll some dice and the result would determine whether or not their action succeeded or failed.

I love Dungeons and Dragons and I have played it weekly for over a year now. I have mostly been the Dungeon Master for our game but I have also been a player a few times.



Dungeons and Dragons has been an experience that has brought my friend and I closer together. I first began playing with a separate group when I was in high school. It was over the summer of my Junior year that I made my first character. An actor and singer

with a passion for daring and exciting adventures. I was a theatre kid so I enjoyed the role play aspect of Dungeons and Dragons. Sitting in a room with my friends and playing a game of pretend. The group I played with that summer fell apart due to most members graduating and moving on to college.

In my senior year of high school I started a new play group at church. Since no one else had experience with Dungeons and Dragons before I decided, with my limited knowledge of the rules of Dungeons and Dragons and no experience on how to be a good Dungeon Master, I decided that I would be the Dungeon Master for the new group. We played a campaign, it was a basic hero's journey of a story but everyone gets their start writing an adventure somewhere.

Eventually the adventure concluded. We all had fun but the dreaded scheduling issues began popping up and we were not able to meet up after the finale of our game.

When I was a sophomore in college it had been about two years since I had last played. I tried getting a new group started but my attempts had failed. Usually, because of scheduling or interpersonal conflicts. I was working as a cashier at my job at Ingles when I heard some co-workers talking about playing Dungeons and Dragons. After several conversations we began forming a new group. I was ecstatic to be able to play again.

The new group included Josh: my best friend of seven years, Katie: a friend from high school whom I reconnected with when we started working at Ingles, a local grocery store , and Lane: a guy I met at the same grocery store whom I have become incredibly close to. When the group had first discussed playing Dungeons and Dragons together I told them I had some past experiences with the game but I had not played it for almost two years. Since I had been a Dungeon Master before, the responsibility fell on me to prepare the game. When Lane, Katie, and I discussed playing Dungeons and Dragons initially our third player was a cashier at Ingles named Logan but Logan lost interest and left the discussion of the game so I decided, with Katie and Lane's approval, to bring Josh to our games. I was nervous preparing to be the Dungeon Master. I wanted everyone to have a good time and I felt the pressure of expectation (most of which I projected onto myself but still), I studied the rules, came up with interesting plot points, rewrote certain sections of the game to intersect with their backstories. I was ready.

The first session came. It was the summer of 2020. We debated how to meet with each other given the COVID-19 pandemic. We decided we could meet in-person provided we took the proper safety precautions. We would report to each other if we ever felt sick as well as any positive or negative COVID test results. We took our temperatures before we started. We washed

our hands before we started playing. In hindsight we could have played online but none of us really knew how. We were also desperate for actual human interaction outside of work and our own families.

We all sat around the table, character sheets written, dice bought, rules established. Josh was playing as Erebos, Katie was Voltaire, and Lane was Brushstroke. We started and the first session we played together was one of the most fun experiences I have ever had. Everyone at that table was excited to be there and work together to create this story, this experience. The players worked together and lifted each other up. I had read horror stories online about players being selfish and unwilling to work with the rest of the group and I was relieved when it became crystal clear that it wouldn't be a problem. I had worked hard preparing this story and I was overjoyed that it had such a strong start.

One moment in particular I will never forget is when Brushstroke, the aforementioned Bard, provided relief to a grieving father who had lost his son by using magic to change his appearance and appear as his son. It was a pure, human moment that my friend Lane and I brought to life with just our imagination. In that moment I was the grieving father and Lane was his son brought back to him if only for a moment. I was so engrossed in that moment and I actually started to tear up. It didn't matter that we at the table had imagined the whole scenario, it was real to us.

Have we had bad sessions before ? Sure. During one particularly poor session we decided to play for twice as long as usual, going from a four hour session to an eight hour one. In theory this was a good idea but in practice less so. Towards the end of the session we were tired, and at each other's throats. It was a long and tiring session and the fictional conflicts of the game began bleeding through into real life. When Katie/Voltaire made a mistake that almost killed the whole

party, an argument was had. We finished the session tired, we didn't relish the fun we had like with past sessions but dwelled on our anger and frustration. Nevertheless we worked through the issues we had with the game, the story, and with each other. We did this because that is what friends do, when we have a problem we work through them together.

Through my time playing Dungeons and Dragons there is an important lesson that the game has taught me. It is that people are stronger together than they are apart. Whether it is in a fantastical world of magic and monsters or in a more mundane world, I am glad I have such good friends to go through both with.

About the Author: Charles Marvel is an Honors Student at East Tennessee State University. He is currently in his senior year and is working on his undergraduate thesis. Born in 2000 and raised in Northeast Tennessee. He has been in the Honor-In-Discipline program at ETSU since 2019. He is set to graduate in the Spring Semester of 2022.