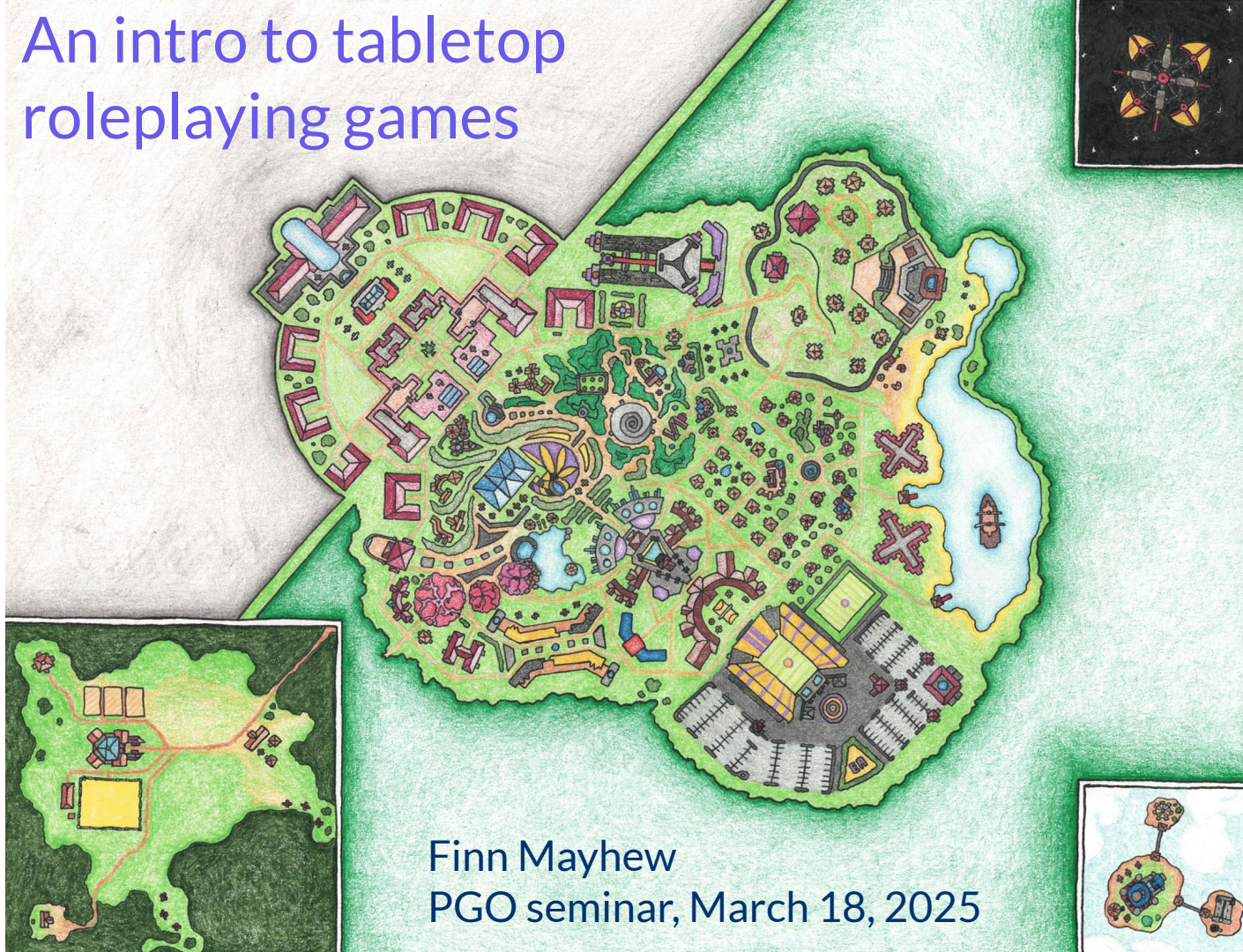


An intro to tabletop roleplaying games

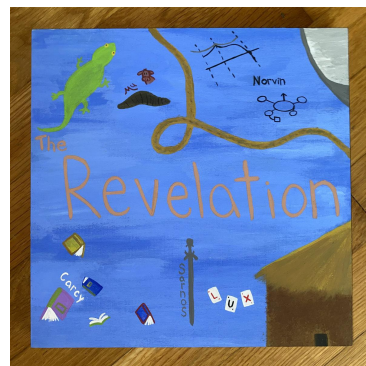


Finn Mayhew
PGO seminar, March 18, 2025

Résumé

	Cody	Finn	Chris	Joe	Aurelia	Avis	Sean	John	Sues
Season 13: Season of Ghosts (Pathfinder 2E)	Kolumbo	GM	Nagaraja	Mei	Yang				
Season 12 (D&D 5E)	Dorothea	Gnishilda	Santa	DM	Chaldea	BanBan			
Season 11 (D&D 5E)	DM	Magnus	Lewellyn	Adélard, Jugemu	Frederick			Keerha	
Season 10: Galactic Gazette (D&D 5E)	Fank	DM	DM	Nyssa	Cordelia			Jejin	
Season 9: Twinside Noir (D&D 5E)	DM	Merrin	Dent	William		Rand			E
Season 8 (Call of Cthulhu 7E)	Chad	Keeper	Hans			Oliver			Olivia
Season 7 (D&D 5E)	*kickball sound*	Swan	Panuchi			DM			Alexei
Season 6: You Are (Maybe) Gods (D&D 5E)	DM	Jess	André	Narcissa					
Season 5 (D&D 5E)	"Big Guy"	DM	Tengo	Zoi		Wahl	Ikgik		Krieg
Season 4 (D&D 5E)	DM	Louise		Narcissa		Cindy	Rosh		
Season 3 (D&D 5E)	Snarf	Roman, Suno	Beard			Eve	DM		
Season 2 (D&D 5E)	Geoff	DM	Kaph			Griff	Tzaldrak		
Season 1 (D&D 4E)	DM	Axiom	Lokag			Skeletor, Kripsy	Kelae		

+



- Have played in 14 campaigns, 6 of which I GMed
- Have run many one-shots
- Have listened to a lot of actual-play
- Things my friends have done that are remarkable that I want to mention:
 - My roommate in college reformatted the D&D 4e player's handbook
 - Another college friend wrote thousands of pages of lore for a campaign we co-ran

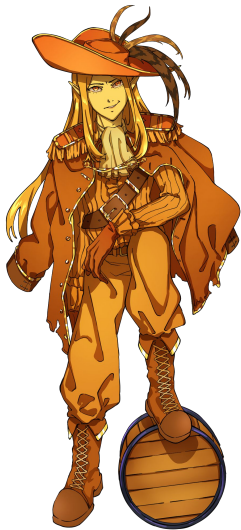
“Roleplaying game”? Pretend to be someone/something:

a character made
for a game



Link from the Zelda
franchise

an original character



Fankh from Galactic Gazette
(my friend Cody's character)

a location



a town from one playthrough
of The Quiet Year

a concept

A player decides to play the court nobility as Time. They are eager for the king to make a decision. If he doesn't stop waffling, they may take matters into their own hands.

an example of Time from the
Microscope manual

“Tabletop”?

You play either at a real table or online using “virtual tabletop” software



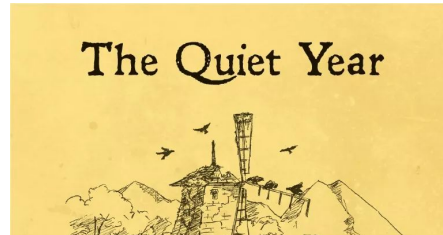
Glossary

- **Players:** everyone at the table, colloquially everyone but the GM
- **Game master (GM):** the player who largely dictates and ultimately decides what happens in the story world
 - Given different names in different game systems (DM, Keeper, MC, Storyteller, etc.)
- **Player characters (PCs):** the characters played by the players, collectively the “party”
- **Non-player characters (NPCs):** the characters played by the GM



Glossary

- **Game system:** a set of written rules a GM can use to simulate the story world
 - Examples: Dungeons & Dragons, Pathfinder, Call of Cthulhu
 - Often paired with a set of pre-written adventures and other content (monsters, spells, items, locations, NPCs, etc.)
 - *Systems are suggestions* – the GM is free to modify anything about the system for the campaign, overriding rules as written (“RAW”)

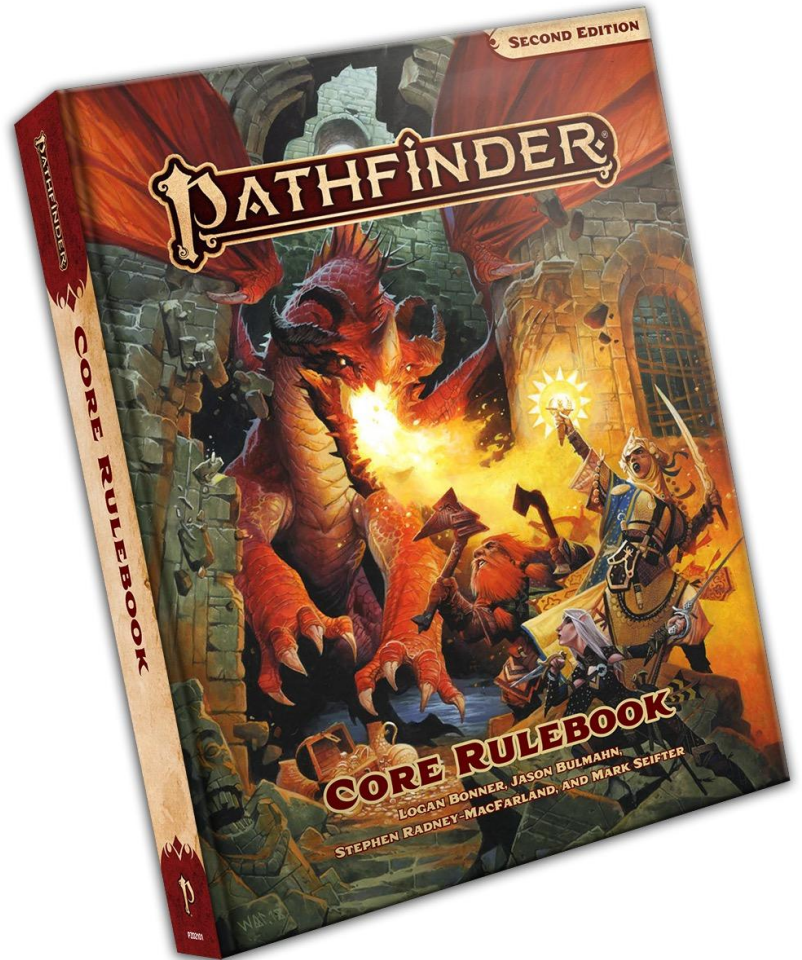


Glossary

- **Story world:** a fictional world in which a game takes place
- **Session:** an around 2-6-hour sitting during which play happens
- **Campaign:** a collection of sessions in a single story world, featuring the ~same characters played by the ~same players
 - Any number of sessions – longest running is Ed Greenwood's Forgotten Realms, which has been going since 1978
- **One-shot:** a single session designed to contain a full adventure
 - Often use small systems, some of which can be written on a single page – look up “one-page RPGs” or “micro-RPGs”



From here on, I'll
use Pathfinder 2e
as an example



How do you start a campaign?

- Get a group of around 4-7
- Choose a GM
- The GM either writes an adventure or buys a pre-written adventure
- In collaboration with the GM, each player makes a character that fits into the adventure's world
- Anyone who doesn't know how to play reads up on the system
- Someone (usually the GM) makes a schedule for sessions, and then y'all start playing!



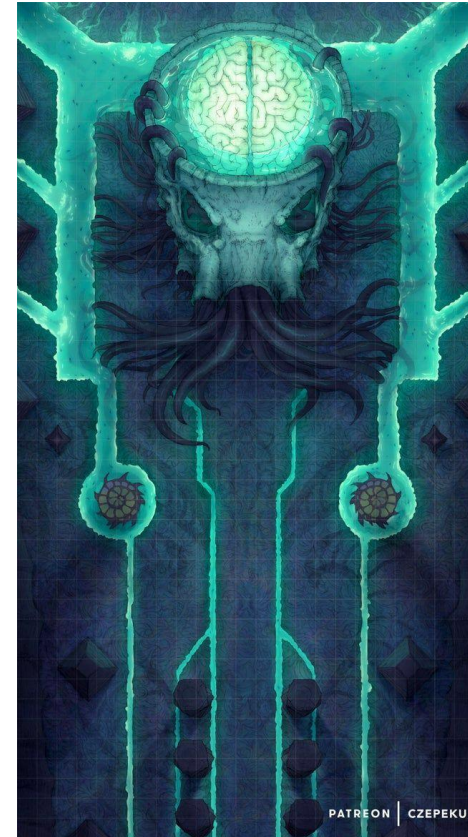
General gameplay loop

1. The GM describes the situation the characters are in
 2. A player says what they want their character to do
 3. The GM and/or the player roll dice and add modifiers to the number rolled
 4. Based on the roll, the GM determines and describes if and how the character succeeded or failed in their action
- ^ This tends to happen once every few minutes – most of the time, it's just roleplaying: the players talk as their characters and describe what they do
 - The GM calls for a roll when they want to let the *system* randomly decide the degree of success of an action



Gameplay modes

- In PF2e, there are three “modes of play”, which are switched between based on what is appropriate for the current moment in the story
- Encounter mode: fights, social encounters, anything where managing time on the scale of six seconds is appropriate
- Exploration mode: travel, dungeons – time is measured on the scale of ten minutes or so
- Downtime mode: when there is no immediate threat – time measured on the scale of days, weeks, or longer
- Roleplaying can happen within any mode – can be exciting when it happens during encounters!



Ahh! Roleplaying!

- Yes, it is scary when you start!
 - What if everyone else is a better actor than me?
 - What if I can't think of something interesting or funny to do?
 - Pretending to be a fictional character (especially doing a voice!) seems like it would be humiliating!
- My request: try it out anyway
 - It is healthy to do things that push your boundaries
 - You don't have to play a character in a funny or interesting way, especially when you start out – and you certainly don't have to do a character voice – you are just here to have fun
 - You get to explore different parts of your personality – try out leaning into a trait you have, or play a character who is very different from you and see what the world looks like from their perspective
 - Acting (in general) broadens your experience



How do you roleplay?



How do you roleplay?

- That's from a sitcom and is not meant to be taken seriously, but it is genuinely good advice for TTRPGs!
- You don't need complex acting techniques – you are just there to have fun, and all you need is to pretend that you are your character and do and say what you would imagine they would do or say
- Only “get into” the role as much as is as fun for you
- If you are driven to learn acting and improv techniques, TTRPGs are a low-stakes environment to try them out



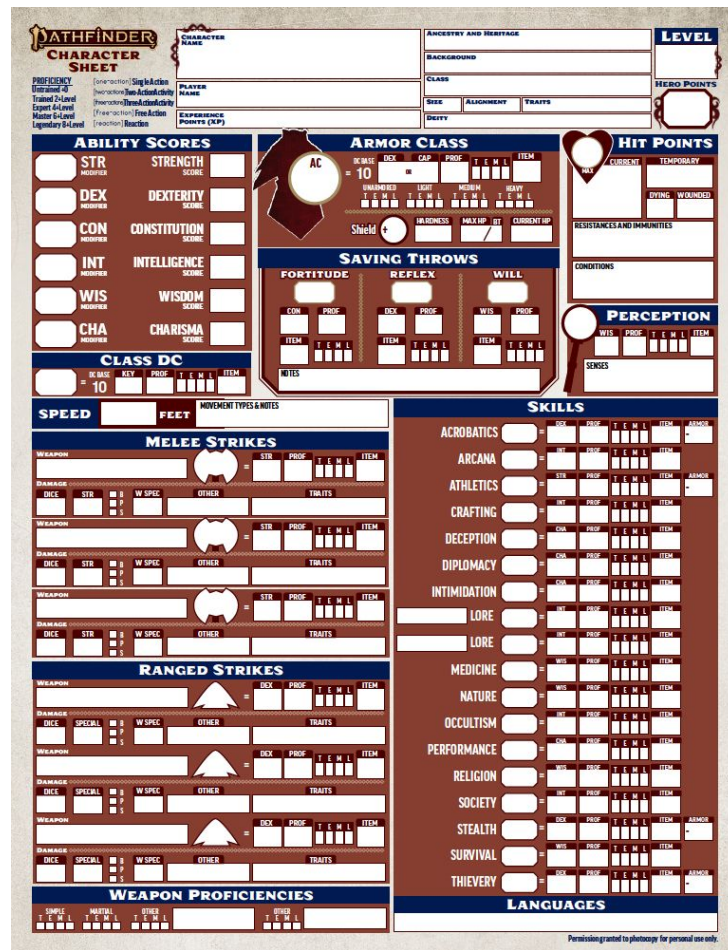
How do you make a character?

- For mechanics (stats, equipment, etc.), see your system
 - For PF2e, *all rules and content (except adventures) are provided officially and for free at* <https://2e.aonprd.com/>
- Your GM will probably give you a list of questions to have the answers to that are relevant for the campaign

 Finn 7/18/24, 9:24 AM

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER ABOUT YOUR PC FOR SESSION ZERO:

1. Name, class, ancestry, background
2. Faction affiliation or lack of
3. Job/role in Willowshore
4. Where they live, exactly
5. When and how they or their family ended up in Willowshore
6. People they're close with in Willowshore if any (can be any characters mentioned in the players' handbook or you can invent people)
7. People they're close with outside of Willowshore if any
8. Enemies, if any, and why



The image shows a detailed Pathfinder Character Sheet template. It includes sections for:

- CHARACTER NAME**: Name, Level, and Experience Points (XP).
- ANCESTRY AND HERITAGE**: Ancestry, Background, Class, and Alignment.
- ABILITY SCORES**: STR, DEX, CON, INT, WIS, and CHA, each with a modifier and score.
- ARMOR CLASS**: AC, Shield, and Armor Class (AC) calculation.
- SAVING THROWS**: Fortitude, Reflex, and Will, each with a modifier and score.
- HIT POINTS**: Current, Temporary, and Hit Dice.
- PERCEPTION**: Perception score and modifiers.
- SKILLS**: A list of skills with modifiers and scores.
- WEAPON PROFICIENCIES**: A list of weapon proficiencies.
- LANGUAGES**: A list of languages.

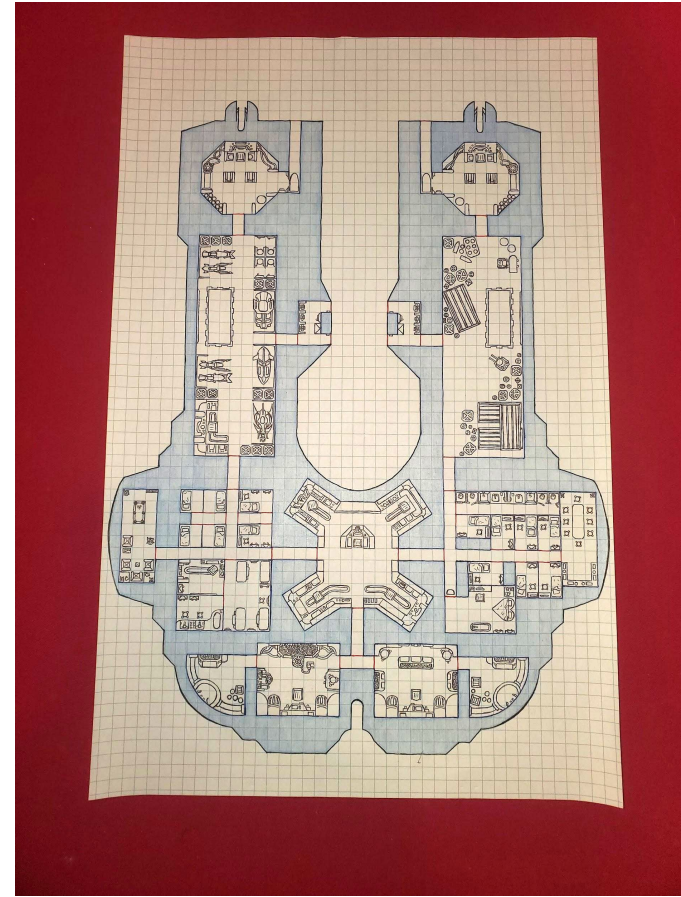
How do you make a character?

- Character concept: my advice: focus on one or two character traits – avoid writing out a long backstory
 - You will probably find that your character's personality forms during play
 - Forming your character mostly during play makes it easier for them to fit interestingly into the world, story, and party
- From D&D 5e: identify one ideal, one bond, and one flaw
- Talk with your fellow players and GM about what tone you want the campaign to have, and make a character that you could imagine playing within that tone
 - Really silly characters are best for one-shots or all-agreed-upon silly campaigns
- Make sure your character is motivated to go on the adventure
 - I generally discourage people playing characters that are antagonistic towards the party



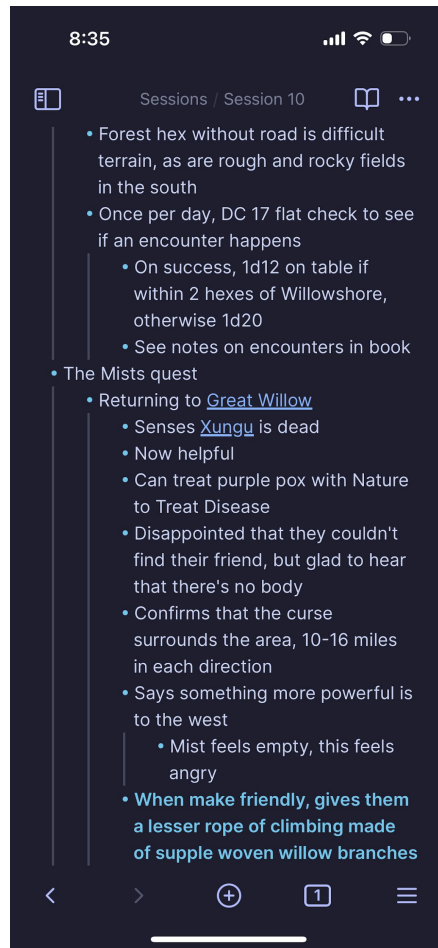
How do you run a campaign?

- So many approaches and styles, it is best to learn as you do it – maybe run a shorter campaign (6 sessions or so) to start
 - Also a ton of theory on this, see youtube
- Learn the system
 - It's best to learn it thoroughly, but you can certainly play with only basic knowledge
- If you're running a pre-written campaign, read the adventure all the way through
- ***You are not the “author” of the campaign***
 - Don't *tell* a story to the players, *make* a story with the players



How do you prep a session?

- Prepare resources for likely events: locations, NPCs, music, monsters, etc.
 - If it's prewritten, read the book and take notes
 - If it's "homebrew" (not pre-written), write out "blocks" for each element, to the level of detail you'll expect you'll need during session
 - A lot will need to be come up with on the spot – let your notes be the skeleton of your descriptions during session
- If there is an opened-ended puzzle to be solved, think of one possible solution and how you could guide the players towards it if they get stuck
- Propagate NPC stories – what are they doing, even if the PCs don't encounter them?



How do you run a session?

- Watch videos of other people running sessions to get an idea of the flow
- Describe situations, ask players how the characters act
- Change gameplay mode when appropriate
- Take minimal notes, focus on rendering the world and NPCs
 - Ideally, record the session and take notes later on the recording
- My preference: use the system as little as possible – when the players are roleplaying, bringing in the system can take them out of the world
 - The most in-the-world you can feel is when everyone is talking in character
 - An elevated version is when everyone is so in character that they are not thinking about what their characters would say, they are talking *as* them



Session Zero

- The first session should be one where you discuss goals, expectations, and boundaries
 - May sound unnecessary but it is really helpful
- Guides for this online
 - What kind of gameplay are you hoping to focus on during the campaign (combat, exploration, mystery solving, ...)?
 - Are there any topics that we should avoid, and if so, how?
 - What are the expectations for the table (phone use, alcohol, etc.)?
 - How will scheduling work? Will session run if only some players show up?
- Also sometimes used for the players to introduce their characters to the other players (usually introduce to GM during character creation)

Banned

- Body horror
 - "Anything like...super not humanoid
- I'm fine with things like extra limbs or shit like that, but the idea of like...just lumps of flesh is really unsettling"

Scheduling

- I don't have a universal answer, but here's what works for my group:
- Every week at the same time
 - Unless I need to take the session off to prep
- Play if 3 of the 4 players are available
 - Unless we know it'll be a big session for the story
→ delay until everyone is available
- Ideally let us know if you know you aren't coming to a session
- If you're not here, another player will play your character if you're okay with that, otherwise your character will do something off-screen without the party

Finn 7/23/24, 12:59 PM

- Wednesday, 7/24/24, 10:00 PM-10:30 PM local (Session Zero)
 - 7/26/24 (Act 1, Scene 1)
 - 8/9/24 (Act 1, Scene 2)
 - 8/16/24 (Act 1, Scene 3)
 - 9/6/24 (Act 1, Scene 4)
 - 9/13/24 (Act 1, Scene 5)
 - 10/4/24 (Act 1, Scene 6)
 - 10/25/24, 7:30 PM local (Act 1, Scene 7)
 - 11/22/24, no Cody (Act 1, Scene 8)
 - 12/6/24, no Aurelia (Act 1, Scene 9)
 - 1/17/25, 8:00 PM local (campaign review)
 - 1/24/25, 8:00 PM local, no Cody (Act 1, Scene 10)
 - 1/31/25, 8:00 PM local, no Chris (Act 1, Scene 11)
 - 2/21/25 (Act 1, Scene 12)
 - 2/28/25, 8:00 PM local (Act 1, Scene 13)
- Past ^

Future v

- 3/21/25, time change to 8 ET
- ...

Unless otherwise marked, dates are Fridays
and times are 8-11 ET (edited)

Actual-play podcasts

- [The Adventure Zone](#) (2014-present, 1-hour episodes)
- [Dimension 20](#) (2018-present, 1-2-hour episodes)
- [Critical Role](#) (2015-present, 2-5-hour episodes)
- Many, many others
 - Mine:
 - [Galactic Gazette](#) (2020-2021, 5-hour episodes)
 - [The Endless Shore](#) (2024-present, 3-hour episodes)



Thanks!

