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As told to Lior Phillips, 2570 words.

Tags: Acting, Writing, Games, Business, Collaboration, Inspiration, Beginnings.

Actor and writer Brennan Lee Mulligan on balancing art and stamina

Actor, writer, and Dungeon Master Brennan Lee Mulligan on the benefit of obstacles and limitations, the intersection of art and commercial products, and the power of world building.

You usually film your table-top role playing show *Dimension 20* in the “dome set” that you have built, but with the pandemic you’ve needed to shift to Zoom. Losing the physicality of the performances a bit and not having the sets and miniatures, what was your strategy to make sure that you could keep your creativity and sanity? How did you make sure that you were still feeling as fulfilled?

I was incredibly nervous about it! In some ways I can be a little bit of an old fogey. I have a lot of nostalgia and romanticism for analog, things of the past. I have that romantic sensibility that there’s nothing like getting around a table physically with your friends.

But most creative people will tell you that facing an obstacle can create some of the pieces of art that you’re the most excited about. And that was definitely the case with *Dimension 20*. We have these incredible miniatures and battle sets, but people don’t realize that that started as a restriction. Our miniature shop is just unparalleled. [Production designer and creative producer] Rick Perry is a genius, and the people that work for him are so talented. But if we’re looking at other big tentpole D&D shows, a lot of the most successful shows have the benefit of being a livestream show. When you stream live, you have this tremendous sense of community. It becomes an event. Our shows are filmed and edited. So from the beginning, one of the biggest strengths of the show now was actually a reaction to a limitation.

So when we got to thinking about the remote aspect of things, we leaned into our limitations. Since everyone was trapped at home, we could get this all-star crew of D&D streamers. Because we’re not eating out of their busy schedule, we ended up being able to film with this really remarkable cast. Every limitation opens some kind of opportunity for a creator.

The caliber of players on the show is impeccable, but another thing I’ve always loved about *Dimension 20* is that it’s so diverse in its cast and in its characters. For many people, Dungeons and Dragons has this association of only bearded white men sitting around a table. Was breaking that preconception an important part of creating the show?

First of all, I feel very lucky. I was introduced to the game by my mom when I was nine years old. My mom is an incredible creative figure. Her name is Elaine Lee, and she’s a comic book writer and a sci-fi

author. She would agree with your characterization of the game. My mom was in this nerdy comic book space, going to comic book conventions for a long time with just a preponderance of these old white dudes—some of whom were actively antagonistic to other groups of people entering the hobby. And others, even if they were well-intentioned, maybe inadvertently making the space less welcoming by not taking active steps to ensure that there was no gatekeeping going on.

But when I was a kid, my first D&D group was half girls, so that idea of the game as being just for boys was never accurate for me. And then by the time I got to College Humor and we were casting the show, I had been playing D&D with most of the people that were in that core *Dimension 20* cast for years. The cast of people that we got were the six best D&D players we could find.

But as a producer on the show, it was important to make sure that we also had a diverse cast, always striving to make sure that our table is as welcoming as possible. That is absolutely a moral imperative. People that are watching your show can see themselves being included as much as possible. If you aren't hiring a diverse crew, both in front of and behind the camera, I can guarantee you you're not getting the best people. Prioritizing diversity means that you are removing the systemic obstacles and allowing the best people to come into your project.

When I see people on social media posting about the show, people are excited to see themselves represented, whether it's someone who identifies as asexual hearing that from a character for the first time in Liam in *A Crown of Candy* or someone on the autism spectrum feeling like they have a more nuanced and caring representative in Ayda from *Fantasy High*. When you talk about improvisation and theater of the mind, it's logical that that diversity would happen, but it doesn't. That representation is so rare but it can be life-changing.

I always want to be very careful talking about this because I am so acutely aware of how much work there is left to do, both on the part of myself as Dungeon Master and the show in general. We can always be improving.

I have been most impacted by the conversations that happen often prior to these games. By that I mean the hard work, both academically and emotionally, and in terms of educators and activists who stress the importance of concepts like representation. Prior to me working at *Dimension 20*, I was exposed to these ideas often on social media. The credit is largely due to the really hard, intense work of people moving a conversation forward. Creators do have this ethical responsibility of working with sensitivity consultants, of trying to be as diligent as possible, knowing that we're going to make mistakes, but not letting that deter us from the effort to correct and amend those mistakes and to try again.

We always are striving to live up to these values and I hope that we get as close as possible as often as possible. So, the words of affirmation and praise from people that have found value in the show... I almost can't process it. It's honestly hard to digest but it means the world.

Because of that depth of care, *Dimension 20* stretches from absolutely hilarious moments to tragically tear-jerking. So when you get to places where the cast is in tears, and you know the audience will be as well, do you feel a sense of success as the Dungeon Master? Or is it too powerful in that moment to even step outside of the world and consider it as a creative project?

We are friends first, and then storytellers. We have a human responsibility to each other, and then after that, we are trying to craft a very meaningful piece of media. For those deeply emotional moments, I would say to everybody who's running their own game, make sure that you have safety tools in place. It's very possible that your players don't want to go to those deeply emotional places and would prefer something a little bit sillier, or just a little bit less intense. We have an understanding that while we are playing a game together, we are also making a show. And to that extent, the degree to which we go to those places of deep feeling feels not dissimilar to actors in a stage production that go out and have to find the same breakdown of tears every night and twice on Saturdays and Sundays. So we do recognize that we get to these very intense emotional places and want to take care of each other when we get there.

As a Dungeon Master and producer, you have to create dozens and dozens of characters from different worlds and see from each of their perspectives. But! How does your brain function across all of those different facets? Is it just about compartmentalizing your creativity?

There's a great term that Aabria Iyengar uses to talk about DMing—she's a genius DM and a brilliant person, and a cast member on *Pirates of Leviathan*. She talks about "splitting your alar," which is a term from Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind*. It basically comes down to multiple magical effects [occurring] at the same time. You're splitting your mind between multiple tasks. If I'm playing a character in a scene, there is a chunk of my brain in character, managing the voice, and reacting honestly in the moment to what the person is saying, but there's another part at a bird's eye view, three thousand feet above what you're seeing, that is logging everything going on.

You can definitely see the edges of my mental capacity. I use a lot of filler words. I say "rad" a lot. I say "incredible" a lot. I often will start descriptions by describing what the PCs [Player Characters] see even if the sensory information that they're going to get is only auditory or smell-based. I'll be like, "You see... a strange noise." That comes from the fact that I'm just at my mental limit. Those little crutches come in because I am managing mechanical, combat-based information while considering multiple different character motivations and trying to manage the overarching story. And in *Dimension 20*, I'm also managing the clock, knowing that our cameras are going to run out of storage space at a certain moment and we need to keep things moving.

That's such a fascinating concept. *Dimension 20* has always been such a powerful collaborative effort. Has that come naturally to you?

If it wasn't natural, by this point it has become natural. Twenty years of playing this game has made it almost second nature at this point. That is such an interesting part of the art forms that I've dedicated a lot of time to, whether it's improv, LARPing, or D&D. It's this element of storytelling as an act of service, where you're spending a ton of effort trying to lift others up. In improv it's your scene partner, in D&D it's your player characters, in LARPing it's the participants that are going to be playing your game. That part of using storytelling as an act of service to lift someone else up and engage them in an experience of the fantastical has maybe always been there. That's just something that I really love, to the extent that I now play D&D professionally. It is my nine-to-five job and I still look to play games with my friends outside of that. I just can't get enough. It is the most fulfilling activity I can think of.

I know that you're working on multiple seasons of the show at once right now, in addition to your other creative outlets. How do you avoid creative stuck-ness or burnout?

I hope I don't sound like a robot when I say this, but the burnout factor has not really hit. I have definitely felt burnout in other creative projects before, but with D&D, as cynical as I can get, when you sit down at the head of the table and you look at that group of people looking up at you ready to go on an adventure, the doldrums and the exhaustion just melt away. I've never experienced not being excited at that moment. By the end of the day you're fried, but at that moment it's a good fry. People have different personal blessings, and if I was going to name what I think my personal superpower is, it's probably more to do with stamina and endurance than anything like creativity.

I remember my aunt had a very sweet dog, this old Queensland Heeler, a corgi-looking dog. One day I was playing fetch with the dog, and my aunt said, "She loves playing fetch, but you have to stop after a couple minutes because she'll catch that ball until she gets heat stroke and passes out." And I have always identified with that dog. So in talking about burnout, and I say this with an understanding that this is a form of blessing and an unearned privilege to be built this way, but my mental wall is probably past my physical wall. I would probably drop from dehydration when it comes to running games before I would drop from getting creatively burnt out.

One of the best pieces of advice my mom gave me when I was little was that ideas are a dime a dozen. The thing is to do it. Put the words on the paper, move forward. You need to find a balance in yourself, if you're a creative person, between what percentage of what you're doing is going to be art, and what percentage of what you're doing is going to craft. I love art, but the word "art" gets people stuck in their heads sometimes. It has these connotations that are very romantic. You think of inspiration and your muse, and all this mystical stuff that gets you in your head. When in reality, inspiration can come from the fact we're already shooting in four weeks and it's got to get done. Don't get too precious with it. Just get something done.

That kind of pragmatism is probably a good ingredient for people to include in their creative soul: to not be 100 percent at the mercy of the muses. This is also a craft. If we're building furniture, yes, put some creativity into it, and have fun with it and express yourself. But also, it's got to get done.

Is there something special that group storytelling or theater of the mind offers people in this particular moment? You utilize *Dungeons and Dragons* not only as entertainment but as a tool for having important conversations about politics, privilege, and power.

First, I am very fortunate to play with a group of people that are incredibly virtuous, kind hearted, deeply progressive, and politically engaged. All of us subscribe to the understanding, which I think is the correct one, that all works are political. The best you can hope to do in making something apolitical is to make something that affirms the status quo. There is no neutrality on a moving train.

For a game centered on the idea of heroics, and for a game whose fantastical roots themselves have incredibly problematic elements to them, we're addressing those, updating them, and moving forward. A lot of these spells and abilities literally include the words good and evil. If we're going to be talking about philosophical concepts that have to do with morality and ethics, we're talking about politics, which is always involved in conversations about ethics and morality, because politics is about how civilizations and societies structure power. There is no way to avoid these topics.

It would be completely dishonest for any creator making art or media to say, "This doesn't reference the culture that created it." It's almost a philosophical paradox. "Oh, you made a cultural artifact that doesn't reference the culture that it comes from? What kind of wizard are you?" If the politics of our show resonate with people, that makes me so, so happy. We're in a very scary time in the world and I think people can sometimes forget that there are a lot of people who agree with them.

Brennan Lee Mulligan Recommends:

Book: *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin

Music: *A Charlie Brown Christmas* by Vince Guaraldi Trio

Television: *Watchmen* on HBO

Film: *Seven Samurai*, dir. Akira Kurosawa

TTRPG: *Wickedness* by M. Veselak

Name


Brennan Lee Mulligan

Vocation


Dungeon Master, Writer, Actor, Creator

Fact

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