

SoBob-S2-Ep3

ALIA: Hey Bob.

BOB: Hi Alia.

ALIA: Okay, so Bob, I'm just going to jump right into this. So recently I was chatting with friend of the show, Mary Pilon, and we were talking about board games. I feel sort of meh about board games, but Mary on the other hand, she *loves* board games. Like ~~wrote-an-entire-book-about-the-history-of-Monopoly-level~~ loves board games. So I wanted to pick her brain about something...

So I'm wondering if the renaissance of tabletop games and board games is in any way rooted in tech?

MARY: I totally think it is. Uh, when I started pitching my book in 2009-- granted 2009 was a terrible year to be pitching anything-- one of the biggest responses I got when people would, you know, kick my butt and reject me was who cares about board games, who cares about board games? It's, everything is video games. And I'm not dismissing the video game industry and I'm somebody participates in it. But I thought, first of all, this is a piece of US history, but also like, I love-- like a lot of people are still into this and then something happened that I couldn't have predicted, which is that board games became hip again. And I think what's driving it is the inventor side of things. And so technology has both given us a reason to play, but also a reason to invent. So it used to be once upon a time, if you had an idea for a board game, your best hope was selling it to a big publisher. So Milton Bradley, Parker Brothers, which are both owned by Hasbro today. A lot of the big game companies don't spend money on research and development. They want to reprint-- it's kind of what we're seeing in Hollywood-- they're reprinting the classics because it's a safe bet.

So then comes along Kickstarter, and so now all of a sudden if you want to make a prototype of a game, you just throw it up online and all of a sudden you can sell the copies. It changed the way that people could create games and get them out there. So Kickstarter has been a boon to people trying to create games and people trying to find and learn new ones. Um, I think at the player's side what's happened, and I would count myself among this crew is that, you know, you look at something like Dungeons and Dragons, right? Which had a huge moral panic in the '70s and '80s, kinda like video games did too. And there was this organization called Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons, or BADD.

ALIA: What?

MARY: Yeah, and people really thought it was like satanic and evil and this horrible thing for kids to be playing. And now when you talk to parents and their kids are into D&D, they're so excited.

They're like, this is teaching them, you know, it's a cooperation game. They're learning about, you know, storytelling and they're off their darn phones.

ALIA: Until recently, my only reference point for Dungeons and Dragons was the teens from Stranger Things playing in their basement. Then around a year ago, my husband confided something in me. One day he casually said, "I really want to start playing D&D again," and I sort of froze and thought, is my husband a D&D nerd? And I said something like, wait, you like D&D? And he was like, "yeah, it's so much fun. It's like a combination of storytelling and friendship." I had never heard anyone describe it that way...

This is really interesting to me. The D&D thing in particular because, um, my husband just started playing D&D. He started DMing a game. Dungeon--

MARY: Ooh!

ALIA: "Dungeon mastering"?

MARY: Yes.

ALIA: He started being a dungeon master.

MARY: It's a big responsibility.

ALIA: It's huge. I'm just kind of so impressed because like, we've tried book clubs with our friends and those don't last longer than maybe six or seven months. We've tried like dinner clubs, those don't last very long. But this thing, D&D, every other week for four to six hours, lasts.

MARY: You've got a campaign.

ALIA: Yes. And they're invested, and they're not on their phones, and they've like, they play a soundtrack, and it's like involved, and they have accents and I'm just like, they're, they're sort of embodying, like, their inner child in a way that I've never, I've never seen adults do. And I'm like, why?

MARY: Yeah. You know, D&D I think, it's been around a long time. And I think people who have been passionate about the game for a long time would tell you it's awesome. I think we're seeing this overall mainstreamification-- if that's a word-- of nerd culture, right? D&D it used to be, like, there were people who were like closeted about playing it. They didn't want people to know that they were playing it, or they didn't want, you know, certain circles to know. And now I feel like we're seeing this kind of mainstream acceptance of the game. You know, Stranger Things is another example that comes to mind. And one of the other things about D&D that's been fascinating is that one of the big pushes, uh, one of the big increases has been women. It

used to be-- and women have kind of this tortured history in the gaming world-- but now, and I give Wizards of the Coast credit for this, they've changed a lot of the pronoun usage in the books and the narratives around it to be more accepting and a little less charged, and a lot of gaming that hasn't been the case. So I think that there's, it's a two-way street and there's actually a lot of, uh, middle school girls D&D clubs, which I think are awesome and wish had existed when I was in middle school. But again, I think there's like so many benefits to learning the game, so seeing it become more democratic I think is a good thing for, for everybody...

ALIA: After talking to Mary, and after hearing secondhand from my husband week after week about how fun D&D is, I think I want to give it a try, Bob. I think I'm gonna go play D&D, a potentially really positive unintended consequence of technology?

BOB: You may be surprised to hear this, but I think that's great.

ALIA: Really!?

BOB: I do! I--

ALIA: You support my, my new oncoming D&D habit?

BOB: [laughs] Well, I mean I, if you start missing out on podcast recording sessions because you're playing, then I'd be concerned. But anything short of that, I think D&D is great.

ALIA: Okay, Bob. Well, we'll see how this is going to go.

[THEME MUSIC]

ALIA: I'm Alia Tavakolian.

BOB: And I'm Bob Sullivan.

ALIA: 07:26 And this is So Bob, the show that tackles questions about the unintended consequences of technology. The sometimes creepy, sometimes joyous, usually confusing digital stuff that makes you stop and go, wait, is technology actually really good and important and life-giving? Is tech maybe for once not making me a worse human being? Am I crazy for wondering about this? We're here to tell you you're not crazy for wondering about this stuff. I've got a bunch of questions.

BOB: 07:55 And together, we're going to find some answers.

ALIA: 07:58 Let's dive in.

[AD BREAK]

ALIA: Okay, Bob. So here's what I'm wondering this episode. Does technology have anything to do with the seemingly sudden renaissance of tabletop games like D&D? And beyond that, are games like D&D actually a great example of an unintended consequence of technology that maybe makes us better humans?

BOB: I think people are craving both authentic experiences and immersive experiences. Right now there are so many ways to interrupt us in our daily lives, and there's so many things that bring us out of the moment, whether it's a text message, or a TV show, or screens that are on the highways as we drive past them. When you're playing a game, especially a role-playing game, uh, you are basically a character in a movie. And we all know how great it is to sit in a movie theater and forget all our troubles. I think role playing games in particular are really, really good at this. And so I think people who are, are just tired of being distracted all the time, crave a chance to be with friends and be fully into whatever they're doing.

ALIA: Yeah, I know when I'm trying to think about something to compare to D&D, like nothing really comes to mind, right? Like there's nothing quite like a role playing game or Dungeon and Dragons, that makes you, that requires you to sit around a table with people you know and love or like, for multiple hours and engage in a story together. And what we're talking about is a game that requires its players to communicate and create collectively a story together.

BOB: I mean, the only parallel that comes to my mind, and it's not a deep one at all, is, is playing sports, playing pickup basketball. And you might think it's not fully immersive until, you know, you're dribbling down the court and you're being chased by three other people, and you have to put everything in your body and soul into, you know, eluding them and finding a teammate to pass to.

ALIA: I love that. "A team sport for the mind."

KELLY: That should go on a t-shirt.

ALIA: That *should* go on a t shirt. [laughter] "D&D, a team sport for the mind." I love it.

It's like what Mary said, it's a cooperation game. It teaches us cooperation, which can trickle into so many other parts of our lives.

KELLY: Okay Alia, so can you tell Bob and I what a D&D game in the year 2019 looked like?

ALIA: You guys, I went to my very first D&D game, and I got to say, it was really amazing. So, here's what I knew going in. I knew going in that, um, I was gonna be joining the group that Brandon usually DMs for every few weeks, or every other week or so. And, uh, these are our friends, so I know these people pretty well. And, uh, I was joining what was called a "one shot".

So this is not part of their typical week-to-week campaign. This is a one-time story that I would be participating in. Which was nice for me 'cause it felt very, it felt less daunting. Um, and it was a story that would have a beginning, middle, and an end. And we would essentially have like, a task to complete in, like, four hours. So I got an email from Zach, our DM, and it said something like, your character name is Akira, you are a twin tabaxi. A tabaxi-- I specifically requested that I wanted to be a tabaxi, 'cause I love cats. Um, a tabaxi is like a cat-human...

BRIGHAM: Perfect. So fun.

ALIA: I'm so excited.

BRIGHAM: Yeah.

ALIA: Okay, I'm gonna read this email. I just--

BRIGHAM: Yes, okay.

ALIA: Uh, I just opened it up.

BRIGHAM: Yeah. Lemme open up it on my end.

ALIA: Okay... "Good late evening, I'm so excited to play with you guys on Sunday and have created base character sheets for you. Follow the link below!"

[laughter] I'll find out what a base character sheet is in a second. Oh my God, I just saw a little picture of my character. Okay.

BRIGHAM: [gasps]

ALIA: "Alia, you are Akira, a tabaxi assassin."

BRIGHAM: [gasps]

ALIA: For all of you that don't know, uh, a tabaxi is a cat sort of creature, and I'm really excited.

BRIGHAM: Yes, like a cat-human hybrid.

ALIA: Yes.

BRIGHAM: Yeah.

ALIA: Which is basically my dream. [laughs]

BRIGHAM: [laughs] Absolutely. Yep. Completely.

ALIA: Uh, "I also left your description and characteristics vague so you could fill in what you wanted and have room to make them your own. Go nuts or keep it simple, it just makes it makes

it fun to know. Okay, I think that's it. Look so forward to this and to getting to play with you, Alia! Zach."

BRIGHAM: So, I feel like this might be a good opportunity to have a conversation with you.

ALIA: I am so nervous.

BRIGHAM: Because it looks like I am *also* a tabaxi, and I might be *your* twin.

ALIA: Okay, I'm gonna need you to tell me everything.

BRIGHAM: [laughs]

ALIA: *Can* you break it down for me?

BRIGHAM: Okay, so it looks like my character is Nori, a tabaxi swashbuckler, and we are two little black tabaxi, uh, people. And then I am a swashbuckler and you are an assassin, and we are brother and sister, and we're twins...

BOB: So Alia, like, set the scene for me. What was the room like when you walked in? How did it feel?

ALIA: Okay. So I walked in, and I was wearing cat ears... that I had purchased on Amazon... 48 hours before... in an impromptu decision. And I walk in, and they've got this beautiful long table, and it's all set, and there's, um, a little box of dice for me that they've picked out ahead of time. It felt very special. I had my own seat at the table. And we all sort of, we were all just like milling about and picking out what we, what drinks we wanted and snacks we wanted, when suddenly Zach, who was gonna be our DM, or dungeon master, our game master that day, stood up at the head of the table and he said...

ZACH: Alright, everybody deep breath in... [inhaling]and out... [exhaling]

ALIA: And then he asked Brigham, his husband, to play the Spotify playlist he had put together for the evening. And Bob, this Spotify playlist went with every single moment of the game. So like when we were in combat, there was like combat songs. When we were like having a moment of, um, where like a priestess was telling us something, we had this sort of like, mysterious song. It was really an adventure and like an experience, and I got lost, in a way that I don't think I've gotten lost in a long time.

BOB: ...There was a soundtrack?

ALIA: [laughs] Yeah, there was. He'd created, he'd specifically created a Spotify playlist for the game that night. I mean, it was amazing. [laughs]

BOB: Okay, so, so already to me that says, even though this is an in-person game, this also is teaching people about tech.

ALIA: Oh, that's so true. Yeah. No, definitely. There was so much technology embedded in like, our whole gameplay.

BOB: Well, the little things, like the, the cat ears, the music, these all contribute to the immersiveness of the experience.

ALIA: Yes.

BOB: Okay. So, um, now I have to know, what was the scene? Like, what did you do?

ALIA: We started out and you know, they gave me a quick rundown of like health points and how to roll for your character. And I learned to like, they gave me like a D&D 101 in about, you know, 10 minutes or something. Basically as I understand it, you roll your character to find out like, kind of what your strengths are and what your weaknesses are, and how many health points you start out with. So you start out with a certain number of health points. I think I started out with like 23, and then, um, when you get into combat and somebody hits you, you lose health points. And if you get to zero, you're unconscious. And if you get to negative, that means you're just automatically dead. So it's like a way of measuring your life.

BOB: It just creates an element of chance.

ALIA: So I rolled for my character, and then we had to, um, then Zach began with this really amazing sort of monologue...

ZACH: It is a new moon. The absence of moonlight is palpable, and a thick black darkness descends over the rooftops of the port city of Vilar. Above, countless scores of stars blaze with an uncharacteristic brightness. It is midnight. Doors are shut and locked as the citizens and visitors of the city take their rest, forming a quiet, uneasy peace. In the center of the city, at the top of a tower known as the Hallowed Spire, stands 17 cloaked figures. Forming a circle, each kneels, peering over the tower's edge, waiting...

ALIA: Basically there were like these three thieves guilds, and we were one of them, and we were all competing against each other to complete the task. And we didn't know what the task was, but we knew we had to complete the task by dawn. And so, then Zach like goes to a bag behind him and he says something like, "and then Naries, your leader, handed you three clues..."

ZACH: The answer is I don't know any of the paths. But I do... have this... He pulls out a little pouch... In it, I was told to give these to you... that these point the way to the first place.

NORI: *Oh?* Ooh, only three?

GREN: I definitely got one. [laughter]

ZACH: The bottom line is, is we all want this.

ALIA: And he like literally pulled out these three scrolls and handed them around the table. And the three clues were like the very first puzzle we had to solve to figure out our first location. And it was so amazing. It was just amazing to like have to collectively figure out what our story is. I just, I haven't done that since, I probably, yeah, since I did a play, you know, a few years ago.

BOB: Can you describe the puzzle?

ALIA: There were like three clues, and one was like, I have four legs and a head...

AKIRA: Mine says I have four legs and a head but cannot walk.

GREN: My proclamation: I give mirth and merriment and they say I smell quite old, but I can turn a timid man into one that is quite bold.

"I have, I am what's desired above of all— above all fame and wealth. Uh, without me it's assured that you'll begin to lose your health. I'm not a fluid dancer, but you can put me on a shelf."

ALIA: And basically it was like, it led us to the tavern. There was a tavern in town. And we went to the tavern, and we show up, and Zach, our DM, says, "great, you've shown up and where do you want to go?" And we say, we want to look in from the back and we want to see what's going on and make sure we were, like, safe and we can get ahead of anything scary.

ZACH: You look into the window... dim light. What is usually a well-lit tavern, is lit very dimly. 20 lanterns around, I would say probably only like 5 of them are lit. Yeah, so you've got a little bit of light. You look to the tables, what you see are about 10 or so people at the tables sitting there, except they're sitting like this... What looks like to be asleep or unconscious at the tables. Um, looking around, behind the bar— you can see like a glimpse of the bar— you just see this older human woman, grey, short, cropped hair, sitting at the bar, just like kind of wringing and folding her hands, looking out at all the people.

NORI: Uh, we know her because this is where we go Fridays at happy hour after we get off work. [laughter]

"So she, she has a friend."

"Hmm."

"Hmm."

"She's always been a good--"

ALIA: And, so then that, that's like our first adventure, is like questioning this woman and going in there and figuring out like what happened to all these people and then figuring out our next location, which ended up being like this mansion where we went in and there was this table that had, um, it had like when you pulled out a drawer, it would shoot out poison. Like poison darts--

KELLY: [Gasps]

ALIA: Or like, poison in another way. It was, like, really scary.

AKIRA: They might not all be the same thing.

NORI: No, I think this is a trap in and of itself.

AKIRA: Interesting... Can you use your maiden hand again?

“Yeah.”

ZACH: Okay. So, you send a mage hand over, grab onto it and [click] both pull... Out shoot something. A thing. [dart whizzing by] ...And right before it reaches you [dart hitting something] ...It lands on the ground in front of you. It looks like a dart.

“Okay. I’m gonna pull the next— the next one around, and then the one, uh, further away from me.”

“*Damn.*”

ZACH: [dart hitting] ...Into the wall.

“Just death.”

ZACH: Another dart.

NORI: *Wow.*

AKIRA: What is it protecting?

NORI: Um, *yeah.*

GREN: Gemstones?

NORI: Now that those are— I think so. Um...

AKIRA: *Uh huh.*

NORI: Should we go up and investigate this table?

“Yeah!”

AKIRA: Yes!

NORI: Flip it over, what’s in it?

“We’ve sprung all the traps. Don’t step in the poison.”

NORI: You're right.

AKIRA: Okay.

NORI: Thank you!

ALIA: And then we figured out, like, a way to get in. But there were these gemstones that ended up being like the crux of the whole story, these gemstones that we found. And like we'd keep meeting people who would lead us to new places. But eventually when we got to the end, Bob, we like, go through this combat that lasts for so long. It was like, maybe an hour of combat and of us just like losing and losing health points. We get to this final room and, um, the three thieves guild leaders are standing there with like, the high priestess, when suddenly, um, our thieves guild leader... he basically betrays everyone and he kills the other two leaders, and kill-- and stabs the priestess and he says, "I'm your leader now. I'm like your high priest now..."

ZACH: As he does it, you see the neck [clap] of Laxis slack, slack. You see the neck of Darren [clap] slack. [falling sound] [falling sound] They both fall into the pit, you don't even hear anything. They fall down immediately. [pulling dagger sound] He takes out two daggers, turns, slashes and stabs into Sherrin's [gasps]. She falls down. [falling sound] ...limp.

NARIES: What was it you were saying about power?

NORI: ...Naries, I pledge my allegiance to you.

AKIRA: Same!

ALIA: And, um, one person in our group refused to bow down and refuse to kneel...

GREN: Not me.

[laughter]

"*Not me!*"

[laughter]

"*Gren!*"

[laughter]

GREN: You seem like a *bitch*, and I don't serve with anyone I call a bitch.

ZACH: Naries walks over to Gren and is standing like super high, and just kneels in front of Gren.

"Aah!"

NARIES: Join me and kneel... or die...

ALIA: And he killed her...

“Can I use my daggers?”

[gasp]

ALIA: Oh my God! [laughs]

ZACH: Go for it. Do it. If you want to... He looks at you—

“*Fuck*, I’m dead.”

ZACH: Pulls the dagger from the side of his body and takes an attack at you.

“[pained gurgle] I’m at zero. I only have 8 left.”

[laughter]

ZACH: I, I walk up... in front of you...

[laughter]

ALIA: Oh my God! [laughs]

ZACH: And I look down at your unconscious body, and I see the life about to leave your eyes, and I— Naries... looks up... looks down... [stab sound] daggers in your chest.

[exhaling]

“20?”

“Uhh...”

ZACH: It’s an auto-hit.

“It’s an auto-hit.”

“It’s an auto-hit, yeah.”

“Oh.”

“You’re out.”

“You’re done.”

ZACH: She’s dead—

“You’re done.”

ZACH: He’s dead. He takes his fingers and, and as he does it, your lifeless halfling body floats over a pit... and falls off.

ALIA: Wow. Oh my God. [laughs]

“Worth it. I’ll, I’ll never bend the knee...”

ALIA: And it was Zach's like real sister--

BOB: Whoa.

ALIA: In real life. [laughs] So it was like, kind of intense.

BOB: [laughs]

ALIA: [laughs] But I love that she like, stood up to him and was like, no, you're evil. I'm not going to do that. And then, then she died. And we all like, participated in killing her 'cause we wanted to be faithful to our newfound leader, who had a lot of scary power.

BOB: Wow.

ALIA: It was intense, you guys!

KELLY: Yeah, sounds like it.

ALIA: It was fun. It was fun. I already want to do it again.

BOB: How did you feel when you...bowed down to the new leader?

ALIA: I felt... shocked when he revealed that he was the new leader. Like the way I feel when there's a twist in a, one of my favorite TV shows or something. And then I felt... sort of like, I look, I remember looking around the room and being like, is this what we're doing? Are we all gonna? Okay, well I guess we're gonna get-- Yep. Yep. And then once somebody didn't, and then she got killed, then I was like, nope, I'm bowing down. And I asked no questions. And I was also playing, I had to remember that I was playing a character. So it wasn't like, what would Alia do? It was like, what would this sort of, sort of dumb but cunning tabaxi named Akira, what would she do? Um, she was all about collecting shiny things. She was all about money and wealth. And so like, Akira was totes down to bow down to this leader and just like, as long as she could keep all of the shiny things in her life.

KELLY: [Laughs] Yeah.

BOB: She was acting in self interest.

ALIA: Yeah. And honestly, it was kinda fun to like, be on the bad guy's side.

BOB: [Laughs]

ALIA: [Laughs] Like something Alia would never do. I don't think, I don't think Alia would do that. Uh, but Akira the tabaxi would, and that was just like very fun to play that out.

BOB: It's really cool to, to-- cause we all have all sides, right? Equal parts dark and light.

ALIA: Mm.

BOB: So it's, it's cool to use a part of yourself you don't normally use.

ALIA: Yeah.

BOB: And do you want to continue that game somehow? Do you think you'll now get involved in a longer... game?

ALIA: It's a great question. So, um, I talked with Zach, our DM, and uh, he was like, you could come back as Akira 20 years from now, which is when their campaign is set, and that's set in the same world. And, um, so I'm planning on coming back as Akira the tabaxi in their current iteration, their current game. So just like popping in for like one or two times. 'Cause they are, they play religiously like every other week, and it's like five to six hours. So I don't know that I want to commit to that amount of time, but I'm totally down to like go again, for sure.

BOB: Did this change you at all?

ALIA: Yeah, it definitely did. It made me, um, I mean like, there's the obvious thing. It made me appreciate this thing that has been a part of my life because of Brandon, my husband, uh, in a way that I never appreciated it. And respect it. I respect it now in a way that I've never respected it. But it also made me crave this sort of disconnection. It made me like, sort of crave, um, the disconnection and the connection cause I felt all at once more connected to the people around the table, my friends, than I do maybe when I see them for coffee. It made me feel disconnected from work in a way that I haven't felt maybe ever. And so it was so nice to just be able to feel not stressed, to be able to feel extremely relaxed.

KELLY: Or you're stressed about what's going on in the game right now.

ALIA: Yes! And that's like a productive, fun stress. That's exactly right. Yeah. You can be stressed, but like about fun stuff. [laughs]

KELLY: Yeah.

ALIA: Not work stuff. So yeah, I totally, um, would do it again. [laughs]

BOB: That's pretty cool.

...Alia, I actually have no idea who to bring in to talk about this.

ALIA: I actually have a really cool person to introduce you to, who can help us with this question we have. She's been playing D&D for years, is herself a dungeon master, and hosts one of the leading D&D podcasts. Meet our super cool guest... right after the break.

[AD BREAK]

ALIA: Okay. Meet Victoria Rogers.

VICTORIA: Hi! My name is Victoria Rogers. I am a dungeon master and producer for a all woman and nonbinary podcast, The Broadwords. And I have produced a number of podcast events for Wizards of the Coast, the company that makes Dungeons and Dragons.

ALIA: We reached out to Victoria because she's a dungeon master and hosts an entire podcast about Dungeons and Dragons, and we figured DnD must be really important to someone if they dedicate so much of their time to it day to day. So we had a lot of questions for her.

ALIA: We've noticed and some other people around us kind of have been talking about how it seems like, um, a symptom of the Internet is this sort of renaissance of tabletop games, and in particularly, DnD. Where do you think this sort of renaissance of, for DnD is coming from?

VICTORIA: Well, I think a lot of it comes from actual play. Actual play is something that has become extremely popular, particularly in DnD with groups like Critical Role, who are quite large and they, like let's put it this way, they're as large as the fact that they recently had a Kickstarter to do just an animated short, um, based on their, their live stream. And in one day, I believe they raised \$7 million, and then, in the course of the campaign, they raised 12 million in 30 days. Uh, that's how popular they are. [laughs]

ALIA: That's amazing.

VICTORIA: And-- yeah. And I, I think because now people can watch this and it's, you know, people can see it in their homes and it opens up other experiences. I think also too, podcasts have helped. Actual play podcast groups like, uh, the McElroy brothers, uh, who are doing The Adventure Zone. So I actually started playing D&D on a BBS. So maybe I'm aging myself. [Laughs] And, so the, a BBS, uh, that was pre-internet. And so that's where I first learned how to play it. And it was on an online bulletin board. And then I started playing in chat rooms once the Internet came in, uh, mid-'90s. And it made it more accessible, the Internet. Because before, you needed to know people, you need to know people with the books, you needed to have a group that you can put together. Uh, and that wasn't necessarily available where you were, or, and so the Internet has opened that up and now you can find anyone in any time zone, uh, anywhere in the world, who wants to play.

ALIA: Bob, even you, you mentioned that you played, um, on a— was it a bbs or were you playing, you were playing by post?

BOB: Yes. I was playing on BBSs and then in, in, you know, early Internet chat rooms.

KELLY: I'm gonna horrifically date myself in how young I am and ask what a BBS is? For people who don't know. [laughs]

ALIA: I'm glad!

KELLY: Yeah.

VICTORIA: Um, it's a, it, well, it's like an online— well, it wasn't online. So someone, somewhere out there, had a server that you could connect to, and it was like a forum, uh, essentially, uh, is what it was. A pre-internet forum that anyone could, if you had the ports and all that information, you could then dial in and connect.

KELLY: Okay.

ALIA: I just think that's so cool that like, that was where it sort of began and now we've evolved to a place where I can sit with Brandon, my husband, and we can watch a bunch of other people playing D&D and experience it with them. We can play with people from around the world, or like in Victoria's case, you know, she's playing with people from around the world. Like that's her whole podcast is— and you know, they're not in the same room. They're all over, they're all in different places.

VICTORIA: Yeah, so we met... okay, so we [laughs] ...this is a funny story. We all originally were part of a woman's fitness group on Reddit. It's a subreddit. And then that, there was a group of us who kind of migrated to a Facebook group, 'cause we wanted a bit more personal, um, experience than, than Reddit gives. And then that became quite large. And so then a bunch of like subgroups kind of split off the main fitness group and the gaming fitness group started for women. And that's how we met, is I put a call saying just like, hey, I want to play a game. Who's interested? I'll run it. And about seven women responded, and then I picked three from there when I thought they were just so great. And I went, you're awesome, let's do a podcast. And they said, okay! And none of us knew what we were doing, but we're like, hey, let's do it anyway.

BOB: I mean, I think the Internet, this is an example of the Internet at its best. When, you know, minority groups, smaller groups who would have trouble finding each other in a small area, you might not have five people within a block or two of you who want to play D&D, but that's not a limitation anymore because you can find people anywhere. And the fact that these, these people can find each other now and exist together. Well, I mean that is what the Internet does best.

ALIA: Yeah, agreed. I'm glad for it...

So why do you love DnD? Like, you've been playing it for a long time, and, and you're doing, now you host a podcast about it. What, why do you love it? Why are you so passionate about it?

VICTORIA: I love storytelling, and I love collaborative storytelling, and I love the community. It's the people. It's being able to sit down at a table, and it's also a way to unplug. Uh, like you were saying before, is you can put everything aside and you just get together and you tell stories. And I think stories are very important for, for people and for community and for, you know, relating to others. And it can also help you explore facets of yourself because you're role playing a different character, so you can test things out and see, you know, maybe, what would I be like if I were to do this?

ALIA: I think one thing I, I witnessed last night, was just the sort of vulnerability that comes with that. The, like, vulnerability that comes with putting on a character. And in the case of almost everyone at the table last night, putting on a voice, and putting on a, sort of taking on the sort of physicality of a character. Um, or in the case of our DM, like really taking on the physicalities and the voices for lots, many different characters. And I just, I don't see humans unless they are an actor. And I come from theater, so like, I see some of those people. But like, if it's not a part of their job, you don't see, you know, grown-ass humans doing that. And there's something really refreshing about that.

VICTORIA: Yeah. It, it kind of brings you back to the, you know, when you'd sit around a campfire and tell stories, because there isn't really anything else to do when you're sitting around a campfire. You don't have that technology to distract you or pull you away. Um, so this is, you know, forcing ourselves to do that in just a fun, lighthearted way.

ALIA: How do you think DnD makes us better people?

VICTORIA: Empathy. It teaches empathy, because you have to play another person. Uh, so it asks you to stand in someone else's shoes, and it can also ask you to stand in someone else's shoes in a traumatic situation. Because in Dungeons and Dragons it isn't always laughing. I mean, sometimes they're, you know, actions have consequences in the real world and in a fictional world. So if... what happens if a non-player character, an NPC, that you were supposed to help, actually dies. Um, so now you have to roleplay your character's perspective on that, and that, you know, that helps you understand how other people might behave in other situations.

ALIA: It shows us how hard it is to think outside of ourselves. And it forces us to think outside of ourselves, which is probably something we could all stand to do a little more.

BOB: So our friend of the show, Annie Murphy Paul, talks a lot about how young people develop empathy. And one of the most important ways is by reading novels.

ALIA: Hm.

BOB: By imagining yourself as a character. And there's a lot of speculation right now that children in particular are suffering from a lack of developed empathy. And so I was really struck, during this interview, when she talked about how playing a role playing game forces you to fully empathize with a character, and that's going to teach you, that's just going to serve you much better in life in all sorts of places. But at any rate, anything that gets you out of your head and forces you to live in someone else's shoes is really good for you and good for humanity.

ALIA: Agreed. And you know, it makes me think about something I realized when I first was learning about D&D. I was like, how do you win? And somebody said, "Oh, you don't win." Like, there is no winning. It's just, uh, collaborative storytelling. And that is why I think it is so inherently good and it can really only do us good, right? Like, it teaches us to cooperate. It teaches us to live in other people's shoes and other people's experiences. It doesn't, it's not about winning. As much as I love playing games that are about winning, this is not that. This is different.

VICTORIA: I'm very proud of this community that we've been able to foster. It's a very inclusive, very welcoming, loving community. And so we, we have our own Discord server. Um, if you're not familiar with Discord, it essentially was like a, a server that you can create to have different text channels, you can have voice channels, and people can talk. It's, it's quite popular in the gaming, uh, it's specifically, it was created for gaming, um, so that people playing online games could, you know, converse and talk as they're playing. So we've created a Discord's community and we have various channels on different topics that people can be a part of. And our most used... channel is actually the mental health check-in channel, um, where everyone, you know, just checks in with each other and shares what's going on with them, and people try to help each other out and support each other. And it's, it's really great.

ALIA: Talking to my, my husband's D&D group last night, that's one of the things they said is, you know, they, they find that— one of the people who attends regularly said, um, this is like the most important thing for her sobriety. Why do you think things like mental health conversations and sobriety, like kind of go hand in hand with D&D communities?

VICTORIA: It's because you have this shared experience with each other, I think. When you sit around that table and you have to problem solve together and you have to overcome a challenge together, you have this shared experience. And while it's fictional, it still has an emotional impact. Like, I've been at tables where people have been doubled over laughing, and I've been at tables where people are crying because something has affected them emotionally so much, like in a wonderful way. And because you share that, and sometimes your characters can die, uh, and so you, you do have that grief of this fictional character that you've put in so much time and effort and love into has now passed on. And then your fellow players, they have an emotional attachment to your character as well because they've been interacting with that character. So they mourn, they grieve. Um, and so you just, you share all this together. And I think that creates a wonderful foundation, um, of trust, and it helps, it just helps you just reach out to each other and be together.

ALIA: I love that. It's sort of like what church is for some people.

BOB: I mean, any group that you are a regular part of, hopefully, will provide you with some of that kind of support. But I think what's important about D&D is the level of commitment and engagement that people have with the group. You know, you might have a book club or a coffee klatch, but if you miss a couple of D&D sessions, you're way behind in the story. Right? And so in your comparison to church, Alia, I thought was very apt. Like, these people are not just part of a fun group, they're committed. And I think it's that commitment and that regular appearance, which leads to these kinds of more meaningful relationships. You'll notice if somebody is sick or missing or is sad or something's wrong, you'll know what's going on in their lives. And you can ask that question like, how was your vacation or what's going on at work? What about that problem you were having with your mom? And I think that's where the, where the real value probably comes from.

VICTORIA: And what I love now is it's starting to become more common to have safety tools at the table.

ALIA: Ahh. Tell me more.

VICTORIA: Uh, yeah. So, because sometimes things can come up, like people have suggested things that, that could, you know, make them uncomfortable. So safety tools, uh, a very common one is called "the x card". So you have a card with an x on it in the middle of the table, and whenever something comes up that makes you feel uncomfortable, you just touch it. And that just means everyone at the table knows, okay, you're uncomfortable. No questions asked, and that's the important part, you change the scene. You redirect it.

ALIA: That's really beautiful. Gosh, I wonder, like, if um, of course my mind goes to consent and my, I, I wonder like if, if young people, um, if kids are like learning consent through that, through the use of the x card? Like, how cool.

VICTORIA: Yeah, and there are even more safety tools as well, and mechanics that you can use. There's lines and veils. So a line is saying, no, I don't want this in the game, this topic at all. So like, I'll often say sexual assault. I don't want that in my game. It doesn't exist in the world. It's just, it's, it's a no. And then, and then you have veils, which are things that can in the game, but how 'bout we fade them to black. We don't need to get into detail about them. So you have everyone at the table go around and list their lines and veils, and you all agree collectively, okay, those things won't be in our game. And then, you can use that x card then to, you know, indicate when things are crossing over into a territory that you don't like. And then sometimes you come up with things that you didn't realize that you had an issue with, and it comes up and you're like, ooh, yeah, no, not into that.

KELLY: I feel like what we're talking about time and time again, again is this empathy thing, where we're also learning, we're learning consent, we're learning empathy, we're learning how to interact with people in a respectful manner. I didn't really think about that, especially the x card. When she talked about it, I'd never heard of it before, and I was like, oh, of course you

would have that. And they do it in such a way that's like perfect. You don't have to re-traumatize yourself. I just really like that it's teaching people these tools that can be hard to learn or understand in a really serious manner. So when you're putting it in the place of like playing a game and then you're like, oh, this person isn't consenting to this action that's happening in this fictional world, yes. But still like now when I talk about it, now when I go through this scenario, it's like, okay, I understand that. Um, you know, I, it's just very easy way to present that.

ALIA: Yeah. The more and more we dig into D&D, The more and more I think everybody should have to play it, like at least a few times. Especially kids, because I really do think like, young people, I think teenagers, right? I think because it's, it's teaching you so much about how to be a good human, uh, like I used to think every person should have to take like a couple of acting classes because of that. But I actually think D&D is better because it just teaches us sort of collaboration and cooperation that I really don't think anything else does. You know, I think anybody who's listening right now who hasn't played D&D should play D&D. And even if you're a little bit eye-rolley about it in the way that I was, I think you're going to be surprised with how much fun you have. If you really, you know, buy your cat ears ahead of time, and go in with an open heart and an open mind and good friends. You're going to have a good time, and everyone deserves to escape. You know, go escape for five hours. It's a delight.

Okay, so for those of you who are ready to set forth and enter the magical world of Dungeons and Dragons, first of all, let us know on Twitter how it went! We want to see all of your best costumes, maps, and adventures. Especially anyone in my Tabaxi fam! Because secretly, you guys are my favorites.

And secondly, here's some parting advice from Victoria on how to get started:

VICTORIA: Um, there are two, two things for D&D 5E that I would suggest. Um, either there's brand new, the D&D Essentials kit, which is wonderful. It's out in Target right now, exclusively at Target. Um, though I think they're going to be doing a wider release that's soon. And it's really wonderful. It, it's just like the light version of the game. So it teaches you all the rules very organically and very easily. What I also like about it is it also includes the one-on-one rules. So if you don't have a whole group of people who, who want to play with you, you only need two people to play it. They've come up with mechanics so you can do that. And then there's the starter's kit, which has the first adventure and it walks the new DM and new players through everything, one thing at a time.

BOB: I also think if you're a person who's listening and think, I just, I don't, you know, that's not me. I don't like these kinds of things. I'm not that creative on the spot. I'm not imaginative. Then you're exactly the kind of person who should try it because it will force you to use a muscle that you've maybe never used or barely use. It'll bring out something in you. And you know, when you do something brand new like that, you learn more than you would in any other realm because, again, you're forcing a whole part of your mind and your body to work that, that hasn't worked before.

[AD BREAK]

ALIA: Next time on So Bob, what happens when we become a cashless society and is it really that far away? But first another mini-sode, where again, Bob will answer one of your questions.

If you have a nagging question about your digital life, or maybe you just want to share an unintended consequence of technology that brought you some real joy this week, write to us at Sobob@spokemedia.io or DM us on Twitter @sobobpod. No question is too big or too small, so send them our way.

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So Bob is a Spoke Media production.

It's hosted by me, Alia Tavakolian, and Bob Sullivan.

Thanks to this week's guest, Mary Pilon. You can find Mary on Twitter @MaryPilon. That's P. I. L. O. N. Her book about the history of Monopoly is called The Monopolists

And thanks to Victoria Rogers. Check out her D&D podcast, The Broadwords, and find her on Twitter @MimiMerlot, like the wine.

We're produced by Kelly Kolff with help from Reyes Mendoza and Tre' Jones.

This episode was mixed by Alexander Mark.

Our head of post-production is Will Short.

The songs you hear in this episode come from FirstCom.

Our executive producer is Keith Reynolds.

Thanks for listening.