

# DYSLEXIA & DRAGONS

## ROLEPLAYING WITH DYSLEXIA

ABOUT A YEAR AGO I WAS PLAYING IN A GAME OF PARANOIA WHEN WITHOUT WARNING THE GAMES MASTER PRESENTED ME WITH ONE OF THE GAME'S DREADED ADMIN FORMS. HE DEMANDED THAT I FILL IT IN BEFORE CONTINUING TO PLAY. WHILE THIS WAS SOMETHING EVERYONE ON THE TABLE WAS FORCED TO DO, IT WAS A PARTICULAR TRIAL FOR ME AS I STRUGGLED TO READ THE TINY CONDENSED FONT AND WRITE OUT THE OFTEN LONG AND CONVOLUTED ANSWERS REQUIRED. SO WHILE EVERYONE ELSE FILLED THEIRS IN QUICKLY ENOUGH, I WAS RESTRAINED FROM RE-JOINING THE STORY BECAUSE THE GM DIDN'T CONSIDER THAT I HAVE DYSLEXIA.

### THE PROBLEM

Dyslexia affects as many as 20 per cent of the population and can affect a variety of cognitive functions many others take for granted, with reading, writing, and numeracy being just a few examples. As someone with the condition, getting into the hobby was initially a large challenge for me.

Being introduced to it wasn't; I was very much drawn in to the idea of crafting adventures and stories around a table using only my imagination. But once I picked up one of the books and began rifling through it, I was mesmerised... but also daunted: all that text, all those rules to learn and memorise.

It might seem a trivial problem at first. After all, everyone has to give some time to memorise the rules, especially if they ever plan on running a game. But when it comes to myself and others with dyslexia, learning the rules and setting can become a considerably more time-consuming task. Time not everyone has.

It doesn't help when rule books are written to encourage lengthy reading before playing: Many is the time that I will open a new three-hundred page rule book to find it telling me that I should read the entire tome before playing. Other times they'll come with no reference on how they should be

approached. This problem persists in how the books themselves are presented, as we dyslexics can also have trouble processing lettering that is too small or close together.

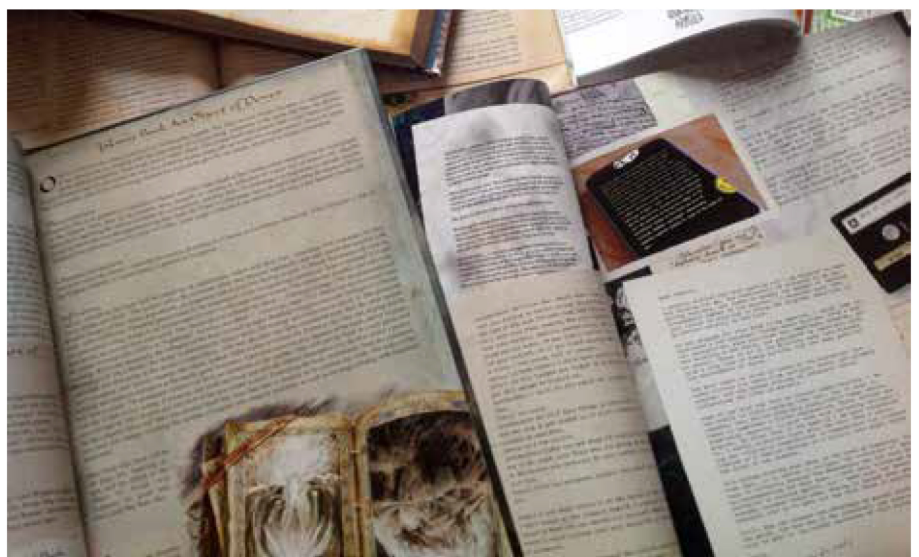
At this point perhaps some of you are thinking: well if reading a whole book is too hard for some people they should just stick to playing simple, rules-light systems. To this I say: why should we be restricted to the roleplaying games we can play simply due to a slower cognitive ability? People with dyslexia have been known to possess great imaginative and creative abilities; Pablo Picasso and Stephen Spielberg among others. To deny those with dyslexia the chance to play and GM whatever

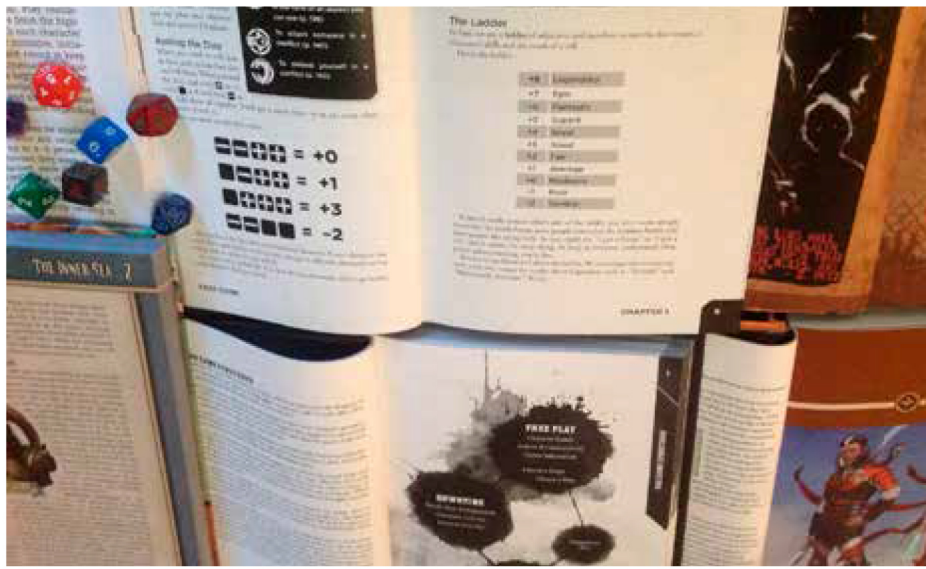
system they like is to close the door on their creative potential in roleplaying.

### SOLUTIONS

Now, the situation in the hobby is by no means dire, but could be a lot better and inclusive to those of us with slower processing abilities. But if more of us gamers and designers had better awareness of players with dyslexia (or similar reading impairments, such as limited sight) a lot of these issues could be solved in a stroke. Fortunately we are already seeing this in some recent games, a good example being Monte Cook's Numenera where he gives a suggestion on how to approach learning the rules in his forward: "Here's a hint that I hope will really help: use How to Play Numenera to learn and teach the essentials of the game, and use Rules of the Game as your reference tool when you have questions."

This paints an ideal that I think should be sought out in all game books, as shortcuts allow for faster digestion of the rules. This





in turn gives prospective players and GMs, whether dyslexic or not, more time to focus on developing their stories and campaigns.

Font styles and sizes that are much more accommodating to dyslexic readers is the next thing that can be done: take the Open Dyslexic typeface this article is written in as an example of what dyslexics can find comfortable to read. Obviously such fonts won't suit all games but with the increase in digital PDFs for game rules, it would be good to see readers having control over both the text font and background. Cass Reyfield, a dyslexic game designer, has written an extensive blog series on this subject that I would highly recommend you check out on his website [casskdesigns.com](http://casskdesigns.com). On the subject of customisable PDFs he has this to say to prospective designers: "If you want to offer multiple versions of the rules (at least digitally) in practical terms, the easiest way is to design the layout so either a) the spacing is similar, or b) the layout can easily be adapted to different page lengths (e.g. always ending a chapter on an even or odd page so the changes don't disturb the next chapter). That way, if you change font and colours, the layout itself only shifts minimally."

Thankfully more companies are using larger, easier to read fonts in their games. Unfortunately, rules sections are also becoming larger with little room for those like myself of finding shortcuts through the crunch.

Cass suggests: "By organizing text into sections and different heading levels, you are effectively chunking your rules in a way that

takes a load off working memory... It also helps people find specific rules they need faster, because they can skim headings rather than feel overwhelmed by a wall of text."

A good example of this can be found in the Pathfinder Campaign Setting book where each country is created under the same format of a four page spread, allowing for quick and easy navigation.

## ADVICE FOR DYSLEXIC ROLEPLAYERS

So in the meantime, if you are a dyslexic in the hobby wanting to play or GM, what can be done to improve your prospects? As someone who had to find ways around these problems myself, I can offer a few suggestions.

The first I find is to always look for shortcuts: Even though the above examples of shortcut offerings only apply to a few contemporary games, I've found that many RPGs come with quickstart rules, oftentimes as free PDFs on sites such as [DriveThruRPG.com](http://DriveThruRPG.com). These frequently condense the main rules of the game into the key essentials. Once I've read through these, I usually have all I need to begin running a game and can then use the complete rules as a reference as and when I need.

The next important thing to remember when you're GMing is that this is your game, so feel free to use and dismiss the rules to keep the game enjoyable and fit the story you're wanting to tell. So long as I know the core rules system to the game, I find that small bits of fudging can be a great help to running the game

smoothly, without needing an encyclopaedic knowledge of the system.

Additionally a veteran dyslexic roleplayer, Robert Berry, had this to say on the matter: "You know how best you're going to deal with your own dyslexia and it's very easy to put a blanket statement out there that if you do X, Y, and Z, everything will turn out right, but I think it's what works for you as an individual. I think preparation is always going to be useful and maybe even speaking to the GM and players. That's probably the most important thing: communication, I think that works for a number of problems."

## THE WAY FORWARD

I think the problems surrounding dyslexic roleplayers can be solved in part by a wider awareness and understanding of the problems they face in the hobby, not only from developers but also from the players themselves. We dyslexic roleplayers have often been shown a lack of understanding at game tables, from GMs penalising players due to them not reading all the game rules in advance, to having character backstories rejected because of spelling and grammar errors.

Still, even within the community we're seeing small things being done to help dyslexic roleplayers, such as dyslexic friendly character sheets for Dungeons & Dragons and Pathfinder. It could be argued that more story oriented, rules-light RPGs are better suited for dyslexic roleplayers, but this does not apply for everyone, so we should strive to be inclusive within all aspects of the hobby.

In closing, I would say that roleplaying has never hindered me. On the contrary, getting into the hobby has improved my literacy greatly and I owe so much to it. I have never been denied access to certain areas of the hobby due to my dyslexia, merely faced with small obstacles, many of which can easily be fixed with better consideration for players with disabilities. It's not about dragging other people down for the sake of a few, but to ensure that everyone reading and playing in this brilliant hobby of ours can achieve their maximum creative potential.