

The DM Zack Show with Sebastian Yūe

DM Zack: Thanks, everybody for tuning into this episode of the DM Zack Show. I am, of course, Dungeon Master Zack, and I am joined here with a special guest, someone by the name of Sebastian, who is very active in the tabletop RPG community and just a very busy person in general. So, Sebastian, why don't you go ahead and introduce yourself and tell people where they can find you, and all this cool stuff that you got going on.

Sebastian: Yeah, okay. So, hi everybody, I'm Sebastian, I am based in Toronto and I'm originally from the UK. You can find me on twitter, my handle is [@sebastianyue](#), all one word, and you can find me on [Instagram](#) at the very same. And you can find me on [Dungeon Master's Guild](#) and my name is Sebastian Yūe, spelled "Yūe."

DM Zack: Yeah. So, you got some cool—you've been talking to me quite a bit about this *Lake of Secrets* adventure that you got going on here. And I've dived into it a little bit and it is really interesting. I really enjoyed the little bit that I've read and stuff. So why don't you talk about this a bit here?

Sebastian: Okay, thank you! So *Lake of Secrets* is, I've been describing it as a mystery-driven dungeon crawl and I wanted to challenge myself to design something that I think would be interesting because I think that there's a lot of really cool adventures about preventing things like I don't know, the end of the world, or some kind of earth-shaking battle, and I was thinking like, well, what if I write a story about once those events have already happened and what happens to the societies that are affected, like after the war. And especially if you're on the losing side of it, that was like kind of where it started from.

DM Zack: That's cool! I like the idea of getting away from that whole you know, the end of the world type cliché. I'm even doing that in my campaigns so it's nice to have a different kind of spin on it. So how long did it take for you to, like, write this adventure and how long have you been working on it?

Sebastian: So I wrote the original draft in about, it took about a month to write the original draft, but the original one, I wrote that like a year ago and it's funny because I originally wrote it for this adult support group and I didn't really intend on publishing it after that, it was just mainly something I was gonna run for then. But then the more I thought about it, and because it was really well-received by them, I thought actually maybe I could work on this a little bit more, I could polish it up and make it into something that other people might actually want to play. So with everything from that initial draft to publishing it, I'd probably say it was about a year.

DM Zack: Oh, nice, nice. Now, you said you made this for a support group?

Sebastian: I did, yeah.

DM Zack: So, what's that about?

Sebastian: It was a group I was attending from 2018 to 2019, it was for like trans and nonbinary adults with eating disorders.

DM Zack: Okay.

Sebastian: And that doesn't actually figure into the adventure so much, but there are a few things, that, if you know that context, you could probably interpret metaphorically. But it was just because we were all kind of taking turns choosing an activity for the group to do and I'd been playing D&D for a while at that point and I thought, well, a lot of people here hadn't played it but I think it would be really fun to do as like a group so I wrote it to run for that group.

DM Zack: I really like how it's subtle like you said, you know what I mean? People that are living with those problems and stuff like that you know, they're the ones who are really gonna notice it. But someone like me, I mean, I don't have an eating disorder but I could still go in and play your adventure and stuff like that and it still feels like a Dungeons & Dragons game. So, was that a difficult thing to sprinkle in a little bit, to make your players your support group players to kind of see this thing and the other people not so much?

Sebastian: Uh, no, I wouldn't say so. I just kind of, I think it's more present thematically. Like for instance, like isolation and false promise are two really big themes and so is decay and non-linear healing. Because I think the decay one is very obvious because at the very beginning of the story, the land in the kingdom is physically rotting and there's a lot of dark magic and the people there are having trouble growing food for their harvest and suchlike but I don't think it was difficult to do. I didn't make any explicit references to that particular issue, but it was actually really fun to write.

DM Zack: Yeah it seems like it. So, you've got a mystery-driven type of adventure going on here. So, I'm running a bit of a mystery adventure going on in my campaign but it's a murder mystery. What have you got going on?

Sebastian: Okay so at the beginning, the—so the whole prem—you know, I could read the prologue if that would help give some context.

DM Zack: Absolutely, absolutely.

Sebastian: That's where everything is kind of introduced and that's included in the adventure as a kind of player handout. It's not very long.

DM Zack: Okay, yeah, read it out.

Sebastian: Yeah, I can read it out. (reads) "The desolate realm of Atarata is a land once overrun by demons. Founded on pacifist ideals, Atarata's civilian army was powerless to defend itself when a horde of demons invaded. This invasion marked the first and only war in Atarata's history. The conquering demon forces took over and turned a once idyllic land into a hostile, barren wasteland.

Sixty days before your adventure begins, the residents of Atarata awake to find the demons gone. People are baffled by their sudden disappearance, but are nonetheless grateful that the demons have vanished.

News spreads fast that the ruler of Atarata, Sovereign Eyust the Fallen (formerly Eyust the Fair), is responsible for finally getting rid of them. Naturally, everyone is curious about how they drove out the demons, but nobody seems to know how Eyust did it, not even their closest advisors.

Whenever anyone asks Eyust about how they ousted the demons, they reply, “I was just doing my duty to my kingdom and its people.”

Even though the demons are no more, Atarata suffers lingering effects: diseases are rampant, and there are traces of dark magic everywhere. The land itself is rotten and people are worried that there won't be a harvest this year because the harsh climate has caused most crops to fail.

Feelings of unease and apprehension grow with each passing day as people start to wonder what exactly is wrong. After all, conditions should have improved after the demons left. And demons don't just disappear overnight.

Worse still, Eyust has not been seen in fourteen days and there are reports of unfamiliar laughter echoing from the dungeon. The remaining members of Eyust's court have issued a call for courageous souls to help rescue their leader...”

DM Zack: I like that.

Sebastian: So there's really two mysteries to solve. There's the mystery of how they got rid of the demons and there's the mystery of where they went, and that one is slightly more obvious because you know, you do get kind of immediately sent to a dungeon where they probably are and the rest of the court is kind of too scared to go down there because they're kind of pompous nobles who aren't really equipped to fight monsters or anything like that.

DM Zack: I really like the, so I like how the demons are gone and things didn't necessarily get better. It's almost getting worse, that's a really nice spin to throw on it. I love stuff like that when Dungeon Masters or storytellers are able to take a trope or something that's so familiar and just spin it and it feels so cool and it always draws in the players and stuff like that, so yeah, I really enjoyed that.

Sebastian: Yeah, thank you, I really wanted to—I mean like I said, I really wanted to explore what happens after the seemingly climactic event has happened. There's still a whole bunch of things to sort out, because I mean if you lose a war, then like the other side will kind of take over your land and then you have to deal with their kin fog oppressive rule and if your leader manages to get rid of them then that's great, but I don't imagine that doing that is going to be very easy.

DM Zack: Yeah. So how many times have you ran this adventure?

Sebastian: I personally have run it I think either five or six times and then I was lucky enough to have another group run it, like, to playtest for me because I—after I had the original draft, I joined the RPG Writer Workshop and they have a course called Write Your First Adventure and as part of that, if I got my draft—my second draft—in on time, they would be able to match me with a playtest group and so I worked really hard to meet that deadline, and then I got some really great feedback and they ran it. So, I ran it myself maybe five or six times and then had it run once by that group.

DM Zack: Ah cool. Nice, nice. So, all the times that you've ran it, do you get different endings, different stories, or like, you know, or is it generally pretty linear?

Sebastian: Ah, yes, so it's linear in the sense that it's a dungeon and it's—there is a clear physical pathway forward, but it's very non-linear in the sense that when you get to the end, you can make any kind of decision you like. I actually wrote seven kind of different endings and I said that like those are

the minimum numbers because you know, your group might come up with something that I haven't thought about. But honestly you can do everything from, I mean you can make friends with the bad guys and send them to go off and go to therapy or something. And you know, if you're chaotic evil and just super bloodthirsty you can kill everybody in that room and take the kingdom for yourselves. You can do anything you like.

DM Zack: That's really, really awesome. So, with this adventure, I saw a couple magic items in a few of the part that I've read and stuff like that. You've got those thrown in there. You know, monsters, are there any homebrew monsters or is it generally stuff you can find in the monster Manual or something?

Sebastian: Yeah so I used kind of sea hags as my inspiration because I wanted it to have kind of an aquatic feel but I did homebrew those in that I gave them a bit more spellcasting and I changed some of their abilities, but homebrewing monsters is really, really fun, but this adventure actually is designed to be as much as much or as little combat as you like, so I didn't focus too, too much about it. And sorry, I forgot to mention something in the previous question: actually every time I ran the adventure, everybody ended up with a different ending which I found really interesting. And it was really nice to see them all in action. Although I did not in fact have a group who chose the one where you kill everybody. But if anybody ends up doing that, I would love to know how that goes. But all the groups weren't really feeling that I suppose. If someone runs an evil one-shot, you can do that.

DM Zack: That would be fun, running an evil one-shot but I think that would be a lot of fun.

Sebastian: Yeah, it was really fun. A friend of mine, she runs a regular group for us but it was around kind of Christmas time and some of the group was away and she said "Okay, I can just do a one-shot and if you want to, you can be completely evil," and I said, "I never get to do this so yeah, I'm gonna be evil."

DM Zack: Nice, nice. Is there anything else you'd like to mention about the *Lake of Secrets* here, or do you kinda want us, we can move to talking about talking about you and your time in the community?

Sebastian: There's a couple of things that I wanted to mention. I wanted to note that actually—I guess can I discuss gender in my setting? Because I personally am genderqueer and I think a lot about how I want gender to work in my stories. And so what I did in *Lake of Secrets* was I didn't list any of the NPCs' gender and I just listed the pronouns that they use. And I did this deliberately because I thought that if I say someone is "genderqueer" or if someone is a "woman," then like that language shows that my world operates on the same gender binary that we use in the world today. And I actually didn't want to indicate that in my setting. Because the way I see it, the NPCs don't conceptualize gender in the same way that we do. So if the NPCs were alive in our world today, they might use the same language to describe themselves. But in the story, there's no reason to suggest that the gender binary exists there as well. So there's essentially no gender.

DM Zack: Yeah, that's...

Sebastian: And I understand that like, there is like a counter-argument to says that it actually might be better representation to come out and actually say like "Yeah this NPC is explicitly agender" or "this NPC is explicitly bisexual," and actually, like, name what you're depicting, which is a fair interpretation. But I know that for me personally, I just like to think about it in a more open kind of way if that makes sense?

DM Zack: Yeah totally, and I mean if people want to slap the genders on, I mean it's their game, they can just—

Sebastian: Yeah exactly, they can absolutely do that.

DM Zack: So, have you received feedback on that actually, or have you not really heard much about it, or...?

Sebastian: No I haven't; I really heard much about it, though the groups that I ran it for, like they did pick up that some of the NPCs were explicitly queer and some of them were explicitly trans and gender nonconforming so that was really nice that they were able to pick that up.

DM Zack: That's really, really—that's gotta feel good when you have your players kind of pick up on those little things like that.

Sebastian: Yeah definitely. And it's like, gender is kind of a mess in the real world and there's some evidence of me trying to make sense of that in this story.

DM Zack: So the story has a bit of you sprinkled into it. Which I'm sure a lot of stories do right, but that's cool that you just sprinkle that stuff in.

Sebastian: And the other point I wanted to mention as well is that it's unique in the sense that you can run it with just yourself as a player and the DM. Because I wanted to see if I can make something you could run as a smaller group or just by yourself. So if maybe the DM has a plan and maybe a bunch of the players can't show up last minute but then don't want to cancel the session, you can just kind of whip out this one-shot and be like "Okay, I can run this for you and still have it."

DM Zack: Nice, so a small group, it could be a one-on-one adventure?

Sebastian: Yeah it can. There's like, I mean I guess, I can give a little spoiler warning here in case anyone plans to play it themselves but I created this NPC and she is the questgiver and so if you're an individual or a smaller party, then she'll actually come with you into the dungeon and she'll be very helpful; she'll try to save you from drowning she'll keep watch. But when you get to the final room, you find out that her job was to lead you straight to like, the bad guys and she crosses the room and she says, "Here are those adventurers you were looking for."

DM Zack: Ooooooh.

Sebastian: But, like, she spent all this time with the party, so she's easier to sway if you want her on your side at the end, which, if you're gonna do combat I would actually advise you to do that. Because it's designed for players of levels 3 to 5 so, yeah. So like that's kind of how I made that work by introducing this NPC and then you can actually have a storyline with her if you're a smaller group or an individual.

DM Zack: Ah, I like that nice little twist there, eh?

Sebastian: Yeah, thank you. Yeah, I added that later on in development, maybe in the last month of editing, I was like actually, no, I can put that in, sounds like fun.

DM Zack: Solid choice! That sounds like so much fun! I love twists. Except I gotta be careful because sometimes I use the same twist too many times and it's not really a twist anymore and my players start to expect it but I really enjoy it.

Sebastian: Yeah, yeah. But it's also a lot of fun if you use the twist a lot and your players kind of get really paranoid and then they think that, and then they think, "Oh what are they doing, what is this, is this person really bad?" and you make them roll a bunch of Insight checks and it's like nah, nah, this guy is actually a friendly guy.

DM Zack: Oh yeah, my players are so paranoid because the first bad guy in my very first game which was the *Lost Mine of Phandelver* or whatever, I basically homebrewed it and I just used the skeleton of the story and switched up a bunch of shit. But yeah, I had Sildar turn on them or whatever, he was like actually the bad guy and it was so fun. So from there on they've had so many trust issues with all these NPCs that I've been introducing into the game and not all of them are bad, but they're always like uh can I roll an insight check on what he just said, even though he's like, "Hey do you want some apple pie?" they're like, Insight check, Insight check, Insight check!

Sebastian: That's entirely valid and I love that. I've never had the chance to play *Lost Mine of Phandelver* myself, but I'd really like to at some point. Isn't that the adventure that comes with the starter set or am I wrong?

DM Zack: Yeah it is, it is. And it is probably one of my favorite adventures that I've ever done. It was the first adventure I've ran, and I've ran it probably like five or six times and I love it. It's just a classic nice D&D story, right. It starts up with getting attacked with goblins from bushes and then you find a cave where there's more goblins hiding and then there's some treasure in there and then you go to a small town and find a nice little town, you know what I mean, it has a little secret going on, it's just a classic adventure and it's so fun.

Sebastian: I like that. It kind of introduces you to all the different elements of D&D, I like that a lot.

DM Zack: Yeah for sure. I'd say it's probably the best if not, yeah, I think it's the best adventure that Wizards of the Coast has out, honestly. I have them all except for like *Ghosts of Saltmarsh*.

Sebastian: Oh, interesting, yeah.

DM Zack: I don't really care for pirates, really.

Sebastian: That's fair.

DM Zack: I don't really know, I've tried. I just ran, I spent like a month and a half with my party on a boat, but I stayed away from the pirate adventure, I had a merfolk come up to them. What else happened they had to solve a murder mystery on the boat, prevent a mutiny, so that was kind of fun to do.

Sebastian: Ooooh I love that, I love that as a concept. That's a lot of fun.

DM Zack: Yeah so, I tried to stay away from the pirates and not I did the boat, I kinda want to bring in a bunch of naval combat stuff. But I don't know what I'm gonna do. That's the fun thing about D&D is that you just kind of go with the flow.

Sebastian: Yeah pretty much, you can just make stuff up as you go along.

DM Zack: So, you Dungeon Master, do you ever get to be a player, or not very often?

Sebastian: Yeah, I'm actually primarily a player. All of the times I've been a Dungeon Master it's been for me to run *Lake of Secrets* for various different groups. I have thought about starting a campaign by myself but I would need to flesh out the world and have a more concrete plotline to follow and everything, and I haven't really had the time to sit down and hash that out. But I am actually a player in I think it's four regular tabletop roleplaying game campaigns at the moment.

DM Zack: Are they all Fifth Edition?

Sebastian: No, three of them are and the other one I'm playing in Star Trek Adventures.

DM Zack: Star Trek Adventures? What's that like?

Sebastian: It's really, really fun. It also uses a d20 system but it's like in reverse, so if you get a 20, that's a critical fail and if you get a 1, then that's a critical success.

DM Zack: Oh, interesting.

Sebastian: I like it in the sense that there are two sets of statistics that you have and then in order to make skill checks, you pick one from each set. I know there are alternate rules for doing that in D&D and so if you make an, I don't know, an Athletics Intimidation check you can do that, but the character sheets aren't really designed optimally for that. But in Star Trek Adventures that just is the system you use. So, every time you use a different combination of skills to make the check.

DM Zack: Oh, cool.

Sebastian: The other thing that's fun about it is that it doesn't have leveling in the sense that you don't really progress and get more powerful because combat actually isn't a huge focus of the game. It's a lot about roleplay and problem solving and like, literally going on adventures in that kind of way so you would, you kind of show character development by moving points between your different stats to reflect what you've learned from your previous experiences. And I actually, I thought that I wouldn't like that because part of what I like about D&D is that I like leveling up, I like getting new abilities, I like getting more powerful so to speak. But I actually like the other system too because it's less to keep track of but you can still kind of show that character growth by moving thing around between stats.

DM Zack: That's... I like that opposite dice system you mentioned there at the start there. That's a really neat little spin on it. So, if you're rolling an attack roll or something, with the d6, or something, 1 would be the max damage, and 6 would be the worst?

Sebastian: Oh no, it's just like that for the d20. I would get very confused if it was like that for the damage dice.

DM Zack: Yeah me to, I'd be like I dealt max damage but I rolled my lowest number. Yeah, that's awesome. So, you being primarily a player, what draws you to being the player versus being the DM?

Sebastian: I really like being able to focus on one character and being able to really build them and have a trajectory. And also because there are a lot of things that I love about being a DM, I find it really satisfying to run a really fun story and have the players really engaged in it and for them to tell me afterwards "Oh I really loved that," that's really, really great, but also there's a lot of, um, like, I do not like running combat as the DM. It is a lot to keep track of, it's very, very difficult and I am constantly concerned that I'm taking too long to do things and I just find that to be a very stressful part of it. And so as a player I feel like I only have myself to keep track of, I know when I'm coming in turn order, so there's an element of that too, but because I get really attached to the characters I make, I like being able to focus on them like that.

DM Zack: Yeah for sure. When you're saying that you get stressed out like that there and you feel like you're taking too long, I always say when people are like, "What does DM feel like?" or "What's the stress like," I'm like "Ah okay, you know when you're grocery shopping and you're trying to put away your wallet and there's just this mass lineup of people behind you?"

Sebastian: Yeah, it's exactly like that! You're trying to pack your grocery back and you drop something and it's like "Oh no I'm holding up this entire line," it's very much exactly like that. Oh my goodness, that's a really good way to put it.

DM Zack: Yeah and your heart's just going, and you don't know why and you're like "Fuck calm down, calm down," and you're stressing yourself out.

Sebastian: And also just because combat is actually very mechanically complex, it's incredibly crunchy and it can drag on a little bit and I worry about keeping the momentum going because I want all the players to still be engaged and pay attention while the other players are taking their turns. And I haven't really figured out an optimal way to do that yet. I just have to be kind of open to looking things up in the middle of it and helping people plan out their moves and stuff.

DM Zack: Yeah it is, it's tough, the combat's my biggest gripe with D&D. I really struggle with keeping the momentum going. It's tough. It's really tough to do that. One way that I try to combat that is that I get my players to describe what they're doing, instead of just saying, "I attack that one," I'm like "Okay, what are you doing, describe your attack." That way I can kind of try to keep them going in keep them going a little bit, but I don't know. Also, I try to keep combat under five rounds. Once I'm hitting five rounds, I'm like holy fuck this needs to end here pretty quickly.

Sebastian: Honestly yeah, that would be pretty good honestly. Most combats I've been a part of and they end up going for an hour or so at minimum and also because we tend to be large parties. Which is fine too because it gives me a lot of time to plan and the chance to use the cool moves that I have as a player. But as a DM it's kind of a nightmare.

DM Zack: Well, what's your favorite, or I shouldn't say favorite, what is your most memorable character you've played?

Sebastian: Uhhhhh that's like asking someone to choose between their children.

DM Zack: Hahaha yeah, I know.

Sebastian: Yeah honestly, um, I mean I'm kind of biased but obviously like I think that all of them are really memorable in different ways. When I make characters I like to give them kind of signature styles and stuff, I don't know if everyone does that, but you know I like to pick a couple of damage types and those are the ones that they do and it's related to backstory reasons or thematic reasons. I like for them all to look very distinctive so even if I don't end up with the most optimized damage dealing build or anything, it still means I have that kind of sense. So, I do try to make them memorable in the sense that they things they do in combat, you can figure out what they do in that kind of way. And then obviously they all have different personalities and backstories and stuff. But that's a lot of material.

DM Zack: Yeah, well, you're on a couple streams, aren't you?

Sebastian: I'm not on streams necessarily, no I've never been in any actual play streams.

DM Zack: Well what's your most recent character? Who's the most recent character you've ben playing?

Sebastian: Uh so recently, I'm playing a character, his name is Ashajontû, I actually stole his name from the Code of Sith just because I like how that word sounds. He is a bard, and currently he's actually, he's on trial for war crimes. But he actually didn't commit any because his family owns a gold mine and they committed all of the war crimes. But he's the only one who is alive to answer for them, so it's actually been a really interesting time to do that. I wrote like, a defense and I wrote a song for that so he could perform them during the trial, and it's been really fun to do that.

DM Zack: Oh cool, super interesting. Do you actually perform as a bard?

Sebastian: I do!

DM Zack: You do? Oh!

Sebastian: Yes, I do! I write my own songs but, like, I write them to the tune of popular songs that I happen to like because you know I'm not really a composer, I'm more of a lyricist. But I do that. It's really, really fun. I feel kind of bad sometimes because I have to put the campaign on hold for like three minutes while I sing an entire song, but I think that the party enjoys it, so.

DM Zack: Oh, they absolutely, I'm sure they do. I would love that. I had this one bard who played a violin or whatever. But whatever he would turn it on its side and play it like a guitar in my games and every time he did that, I'm like "Oh you're the best, man. You're honestly the best. Thank you so much." Because it really immerses the whole table.

Sebastian: I hope so. I'm not like, the best most tuneful singer in the world but I have a lot of fun while I'm doing it, so I don't really mind. Yeah, bards are actually my favorite class to play. I don't actually sing for all of them. I'm playing another one, they are a tabaxi and they have, and their whole thing is that they have wind chimes sewn into the inside of their cape, so whenever they move that's how they make music. They've learned how to do elaborate things so that it actually sounds tuneful.

DM Zack: So, does that affect you when you're stealthing?

Sebastian: Uh yeah, so I had to homebrew that with the DM a bit and she was like, “Okay we’re just gonna give—just take one fewer cantrip and we’re just gonna say that you have something you use to silence your cape with, or else you’re not gonna be able to move.” And I was like “You know what, I’m fine with that, yeah.”

DM Zack: That’s a really cool way to do it rather than just saying you’ve got disadvantage on every Stealth check.

Sebastian: Yeah, which honestly is fine because I would just dump all my expertise in Stealth and have like +12 to it and it would be okay anyway, but, yeah.

DM Zack: So you like the bards, eh?

Sebastian: I do, they are my favorite class.

DM Zack: I’ve never played a bard. I’ve always wanted to. I just, I’m more of a whack and smack kind of a guy. I tend to play barbarians, the fighters. You know the get up in there and stuff. I really want to play a bard. I’ve never played a druid. I really want to play a druid too.

Sebastian: Oh, I’ve played a druid! Druids are so much fun, oh my goodness. They’re hard because there’s a lot to keep track of because they have like a million wild shapes by the time they get high enough level but I’ve just figured that it’s a good idea to kind of pick, like, a shortlist of like five as your kind of go-to for different situations and then you get familiar with it that way. But yeah, I love druids, druids are so fun too.

DM Zack: So, let’s talk about your druid that you played there for a bit. What kind of race was it?

Sebastian: Oh, dragonborn! So, there’s the NPC in *Lake of Secrets*, their name is Eyust, I played them, I made them into a character, and they are a druid. And their stat block in *Lake of Secrets* is based on the general druid stat block in the monster manual. They’re a druid because their whole thing is being connected to the land and being at peace with the environment around them, so I ended up getting to play them in a one-shot and I got to do a bunch of wild shapes and I turned myself into a draft horse to get 60 feet of movement.

DM Zack: Cool. That’s really cool. I think players that know how to play druids well, those are probably, they can be such hot commodities for your party with like scouting.

Sebastian: Oh yeah, they can come in clutch. Especially for movement and sneaking into things, and you can be a literal fly on the wall kind of thing, and it can be really good. We have a druid in our party too and she’s been doing that kind of thing.

DM Zack: Nice. So, when did you start diving into TTRPGs?

Sebastian: I think my first one was Pathfinder in 2014.

DM Zack: Pathfinder, eh?

Sebastian: Yeah there was some university friends over the summer that wanted to start a group with me, so I played Pathfinder for a bit. I liked it a lot and I feel like it was a bit more kind of gritty and realistic to Fifth Edition and there were some aspects of that that I liked and some that I didn't. but the mistake that I made when starting Fifth Edition was that I assumed because I knew how to play Pathfinder, I already knew how to play Fifth Edition and uh, that turned out not to be the case. Because I didn't have any of the books, I didn't have the *Handbook* or the *Dungeon Master's Guide* or any of it, and I didn't end up reading them until I'd been playing in the campaign for like six months that I realized that I did everything wrong and I was playing with half the proficiencies I was supposed to, so I have learned my lesson.

DM Zack: I think my first character was an absolute crapshoot. I don't know what the hell was going on with my first character. The stats were all over the place, numbers were all over the place. It was brutal. Proficiencies? Jeez, I forgot so many, like, what is it when you become double proficient in it, you're like an expert in it?

Sebastian: Oh, when you get expertise? Yeah. The first character I made was a Paladin, and I enjoyed playing that character, but I hadn't really got the hang of how to do roleplay and how to know what to do in combat. And like, looking back on it now I was the player that had no idea what they were doing but you know, it's okay, like that happens.

DM Zack: Oh yeah, we're all learning, right? We all gotta start somewhere. So, did you play any of the other tabletops other than pathfinder? Pathfinder is very number crunchy, right, isn't it?

Sebastian: Yeah, it is. I haven't played it in a while but I would say that it is.

DM Zack: And combat takes a long time in Pathfinder too, so how did you find that?

Sebastian: Honestly, I found it very, very difficult. Because I'm also not the mathematically inclined person so to speak. And actually like, I've really liked playing, I thought I wouldn't like playing online or distanced but because we've had this pandemic, then we've had to do it, but actually I really like it in the sense that Roll20 automates all of my rolls. I don't have to do any mathematics whatsoever. And I just click a button and it shows what I got, and that's really great, like, yeah.

DM Zack: I love Roll20.

Sebastian: I found combat quite challenging. But like, what I've started to do now is that I actually have flowcharts for all my characters so that I can figure out what I can do. Because I find it very difficult to like, create this long list of abilities that like, all of them may or may not be useful or relevant. But I'm just like I can have the flowchart start from "It's my turn, what do I wanna do? Does the party need healing?" "Okay, well, here are your options," kind of thing and it's been really helpful.

DM Zack: Cool, nice little flowchart. I've never heard of anyone making one of those before for your character.

Sebastian: Yeah, honestly I can send you some of them, some of the ones that I've made. I make them for all of the characters that I have to use in combat. Because otherwise I'm gonna take a million years on my turn and that genuinely will hold everybody up.

DM Zack: Yeah absolutely I'd love for you to send me some of those, some flowcharts.

Sebastian: Yeah, I can. I actually posted one of them on reddit like a year or so ago and it was really really well-received and actually it was that post that helped me realize that I was doing a bunch of things wrong, because I didn't realize that I wasn't supposed to be adding my spellcasting modifier to damage that I did with spells and people on reddit were like "Where does this come from? Do you have an ability?" and I was like, "No isn't that just how it goes?" And they were like, "No, you need to read the *Handbook*." So, it's been kind of wild because I've gone from this person who never read the *Handbook* to being able to publish an adventure in like a year so it's nice.

DM Zack: That's really impressive. I'm actually kind of curious, I wonder how many players have read the *Player's Handbook*. I don't think too many do. It's very, I think D&D's one of these games that's kind of like a fairytale that gets passed down by word of mouth, right? Like I think a lot of people learn by sitting at a table and playing with people. Like when it comes to critical hits, there's so many different variations and so many people use them so many different ways at tables and stuff.

Sebastian: Yeah, you get to a point when the actual rules as written don't matter and it just depends on what you have to do at the table and so yeah that's been nice too.

DM Zack: Yeah, that's one of the reasons why I really, really enjoy the game.

Sebastian: But yeah, I'll send you my flowcharts because I'm really, really proud of those.

DM Zack: I would love to see your flowcharts. You seem to do a lot of work on the computer, you're talking about transcripts, you know, you were one of the actual only ones to send me an email where I can find your stuff, which was super appreciated. Um, you know what I mean? So yeah, you put a lot of work into the, what would you call it, the flowcharts, the transcripts, the secondary stuff of D&D to make it all nice and organized?

Sebastian: Yeah, I would say so, just because there's a lot of information to keep track of and I like to have it in a way that is easier for me to access. And it's funny that you mention that because as I said I have this character who is currently in the middle of a war crimes trial so there's a lot of moving parts to that because the DM has really gone all out and created a bunch of NPC witnesses and has created like an actual prosecution and stuff like that.

DM Zack: Oh cool.

Sebastian: Yeah so my character is being held in this cell because they don't want him to just move around, so the rest of the party has been going around the mine exploring and talking to people and so I put all of that stuff into a document and it ended up being like 23 pages long and it's just a kind of breakdown of here's a table of everyone you've met, here's the evidence they're associated with and here's the location you met them. And then I did a more detailed breakdown of here are the NPCs you've met, then we'll do locations, then we'll do items and there's a bunch of appendices at the end so I did that for the party.

DM Zack: Notetaker eh? You're the notetaker of the group?

Sebastian: Well, I wouldn't say that. I generally don't. I find it difficult to take notes when we're playing online, but because this is the campaign that records all the sessions, it's quite easy for me to go back and make those.

DM Zack: Oh nice, nice, nice.

Sebastian: It also hopes that this arc is very particular to my character, so I have the lore from myself anyway. It makes me happy to do that.

DM Zack: That's really awesome. One of my players, we're doing like a murder mystery in *Strahd* right now and they built a case file and I loved it. And it was so cool reading the case file and seeing it from their point of view. I really like it when players put in that kind of extra effort to kind of make the game go a little bit better.

Sebastian: Yeah. And also just because I've been having this computer issue because I'm usually the person that will edit the recordings as well because, I don't know, this is kind of a tangent, but I have a Master's degree in journalism and while I was doing that program, I learned how to use a bunch of video and audio editing programs so it's quite easy for me to do it. But I can't do it on the computer that I'm currently using, so I took a bunch of notes and kind of had those in place of the recording that we would usually have. So it's just, to keep it that way. And I think the DM has appreciated that, he's said "Oh, it's really cool to see all this information written out and it's nice you did that." And I'm like yeah, I mean I'm glad.

DM Zack: Aw. I think Dungeon Masters love that stuff, when players bring that bit of extra pizzazz to the game. It's super, super fun to sit back and read and see the players enjoying the world that they've built and stuff.

Sebastian: I view the Dungeon Master as very much like the story facilitator and I like to think that I'm quite vocal about telling them what I want. Sometimes I'm like, "Hey this is the idea that I have because I know that this big thing is coming up. Would you be willing to do this?" And sometimes they're like "Yeah!" and sometimes they're like "Well, yeah, it's good for me to know what you're expecting because I'm gonna surprise you," and then I'm like "Oh, that's exciting. I have something to look forward to," and I know they're planning something. But I really like to work with the Dungeon Master and to have an open dialogue in that respect. Because then everyone at the end of it is happier.

DM Zack: It's very important for players to talk with Dungeon Masters and for Dungeon Masters to talk to players.

Sebastian: Yeah absolutely. And I have some really great ones who are open to all kinds of different ideas, everything hey I really want to pull a prank on this NPC next session to hey I think this is where we're going tell me if I'm right because I'm picking my spells for next level, tell me if this is actually gonna be vaguely useful, because I don't know, I don't like committing. I love playing spellcasters and I've pretty much exclusively played spellcasters, but I don't like committing to spells and then leveling up and finding that I didn't use one of them that I picked, so yeah. I like to get a sense that if I pick this spell will there be something for me to *counterspell* or something.

DM Zack: That's probably why you like druid too, because you pick spells at the start of each day.

Sebastian: Yeah, I thought that that would be kind of overwhelming but actually I can just pick whatever I like and that's really useful, whereas bard, I'm like, "Hm, I actually have to commit to this, so I actually have to think about it."

DM Zack: Yep, the commitment there, I've seen that happen a few times where somebody will grab a spell and I don't know I don't even necessarily know that at the moment but if it just never really pops up and they never get the chance to use it, that sucks. I should, that's I'm gonna start working and being better at that too, I gotta start looking at my character sheets for my players and seeing you know, a monk is a good example. I feel like people should shoot arrows at monks, because when you're playing a monk and you catch the arrow—

Sebastian: Yeah you can catch it and throw it back! Yeah, you can do that. I think it's nice, it's good, I can always tell when the DM has made combat, like, kind of features, I suppose, and they work really well with my character and also like sometimes I like when they make it more difficult. Like if the DM knows that my character deals fire and psychic damage and they've given this monster resistance to both of those, I'm just like yeah, I can tell you're doing this specifically to irritate my character and that's great. I love that.

DM Zack: Oh, the confrontation there, I love doing that too as a DM sometimes. I have a sorcerer in my campaign and sometimes I'll just be like, "Okay they're dealing so much damage, how am I gonna nullify this a little here?"

Sebastian: Oh my gosh. I love sorcerers too. I have a character who is a sorcerer. They have some of the best blasting spells in the game.

DM Zack: I love sorcerers. I like how they draw the power from within themselves. That's what attracts me to sorcerers.

Sebastian: I just love metamagic because of how overpowered it is. I suppose I shouldn't say it is overpowered because everything is nicely balanced but it feels overpowered when everybody else, every other spellcaster has to confirm to these rules and I'm like actually no I can make this a bonus action, I can cast this without making any verbal or somatic components, you won't know. It's great.

DM Zack: Sorcerers are a very, very cool class. Actually, I don't really see many sorcerers out. I haven't played with many sorcerers. I've only ever played with the one. Which is kind of shocking. Lot of bards, play with a lot of bards. I think bards have got to be the most popular class. Bards and rogues. Have you ever played a rogue?

Sebastian: Um no I have not. I've uh—but rogue—So the tabaxi I was talking about earlier, they were originally supposed to be a rogue but then I was like, no I just want to play a bard because they're my favorite class. But I think if I were to play any not-caster classes I would pick rogue. But even then, I would probably pick Arcane Trickster so that I can have something.

DM Zack: Yeah, Arcane Tricksters are really good too.

Sebastian: So I can have some element of magic. But I think I'd be more likely to play a rogue than I would be to play any martial classes.

DM Zack: Rogues are cool in the sense that they can just kinda dip outta there quickly and stuff like that with stuff like the Uncanny Dodge.

Sebastian: Yeah rogues are fun, we have a rogue in the party already so it's been useful.

DM Zack: Well, what has been one of the most memorable moments for your characters in games? What really sticks out, a moment that just been unreal, that has stuck with you and has been burned into your D&D mind.

Sebastian: Oh my gosh. There's been a lot because my DMs have been really, really good at immersing, taking my characters stories and running with it. And because I like to—whenever I create a character, I like to make a list of NPCs who they may know. Some of them they're like, they don't know this person is alive and they can kind of show up later and surprise them and I like to be able to make story hooks for the DMs in that way. Um, but if I had to pick a moment, I don't know, probably like, most recently like, the campaign that I've been playing where Ashajontû is on trial for war crimes, we visited this village and he learned that mother who ran the mine previously like went to it and absolutely decimated it. He got to interact with the ghosts who live in the village and they have not been able to rest because a lot of them, they left behind—their lives were unfulfilled and they had unfinished business and their possessions were scattered and they couldn't find any of that. So he had to go in and interact with their leader and explain that like, "Okay I know that my entire family has literally ruined your life but if there's anything I can do to try and fix it..." and he has to go explore the village and actually really confront the actual consequences of what his mother did, that was really, really powerful.

DM Zack: That sounds really, really deep.

Sebastian: Yeah, yeah it was. It is pretty deep, but like all of the players are cool with it and before we started this campaign, we did discuss everybody's boundaries and we did do Lines and Veils and I think that's worked out really well for us. It's enabled us to tell some very, we've been able to tackle some complex topics. You know like, genocide and war crimes, that's pretty heavy but we're doing it in a way that everybody is okay with. And it's really cool for that.

DM Zack: So did you guys do a Session Zero then?

Sebastian: I wouldn't say we did a Session Zero, but it was kind of something we discussed when this campaign was starting up, starting back up again. Because it went on hiatus for a little bit because it was difficult to get everyone together. But when we started playing again regularly, we kind of sat down together as a table and were like if we're gonna come back into this campaign, we should lay out what our expectations were.

DM Zack: I think that's a really good thing that you guys did there. That's; a very important thing for tables to have. I think it automatically a) curbs the problem players or potential problem players that are things that might come up. And also, it just means everybody's on the same page and then it's not awkward when these situations do come up. I tend to be a very graphic and gory Dungeon Master.

Sebastian: Yeah, tell me how this thing dies and tell me what it's doing, it's gonna gnaw my arm off. It's really fun, I love that.

DM Zack: There's some people that hate that, they can't handle it right? That's why I always do a Session Zero because I like to curb those problems right away. And you're gon a hit on touchy subjects. Like hey, are you guys, how do you guys feel like child abuse and how do you guys feel about quote-unquote rape, and stuff, things like that. And you do have to talk about those with your players if you're gonna be running a grittier real-life kind of, *Game of Thrones* kind of vibe.

Sebastian: Yeah absolutely. And I think that when I started playing D&D I didn't really know anything, I didn't know what Session Zero was and I didn't know what kind of safety tools were available to me, but as we've gone on and we've played together we've been able to discovered these things. And it's been pretty good. And I think that pretty much every campaign should have a Session Zero and should these kind of things in place so that everybody knows each other's boundaries and what you can and can't do. I wouldn't say it necessarily matters the genre of the game you want to run. Even if it's not designed to be super gritty, then like, you don't want to accidentally drop in something that someone is uncomfortable with or anything by accident, so I think that like you should just do it as kind of best practice.

DM Zack: Yeah that's very true. It should be something that's done for every game. Yeah, I read so many, you ever go on that RPG Horror Stories on reddit?

Sebastian: Yeah, I have been there. I have never posted anything because thankfully I have had very pleasant game experiences. But some of them are really, really awful. I think a lot of them could be avoided by having these conversations, and if you find that someone is not willing to work with you and not willing to respect your boundaries, go to a different table. Find someone who actually does want to play with you and have a good time.

DM Zack: Some of the stuff that I read in RPG Horror Stories, I'm like, that could have been solved in Session Zero. But still, some of the stories I read, and I'm like how does this shit even go on for so long? "Last month my, DM did this and two weeks ago my DM did this, and last session, my DM did this," it's like what are you even doing? Just leave. Like, go.

Sebastian: I mean I'm sympathetic to people who are playing with their friends because you know you don't want to cause problems for your actual friendship outside of the game and it's difficult in the sense that if you walk away, you know that the whole table is gonna be talking about you afterwards and I know that's difficult. But again yeah you're right in that it could be solved in Session Zero because I would still say there's an open door policy. Because if at any point you find that this campaign isn't doing it for you and we've exhausted all kind of avenues of trying to fix it, then you know what, you don't have an obligation to be here and you can leave and that's fine with me. I'm not gonna take it personally.

DM Zack: Yeah, you shouldn't take it personally either. That's the other thing too.

Sebastian: A lot of people don't really see it that way and they would take it personally if one of their players left. I can see why that's difficult but I just wish for these people to find a game that they enjoy playing and that enjoys playing with them.

DM Zack: For sure, sure. Well, Sebastian, we're getting a little tight here on time. So, I do want to give you the last little bit here to talk about whatever you want. This is your moment to shine, you can say whatever you want, shoutout whoever you want, talk about whatever you want. So Sebastian the floor is yours and these can be your final closing words here.

Sebastian: Okay. I guess that I can end with giving a bit of a plug for some of the projects that I have coming up. I'm a writer and developer for *Islands & Aswangs*. This is a sourcebook coming out for Fifth Edition, it's based on Filipino folklore and I've been working on it for the past few months and we're actually very close to being finished. We'll have the PDF printer, sorry, the PDF done by September and we'll have the physical book printed by November. This is something that was on Kickstarter, but it was successfully funded and we've been working on it since then. That's coming out. And I'm working on an anthology, it's going to be based on kind of—so like, the structure of it is a bunch of different adventures structured *Monster of the Week* style, so it has a kind of ticking clock, a table of events that will occur if and when characters manage to succeed or fail at certain milestones in the adventure and I'm really excited for that. It's designed to be, to kind of tie in with the release of *The Rime of Frostmaiden* set in Icewind Dale. So, a lot of those are themed around kind of wintery, themes and ideas. I'm writing two adventures for that. And then later on in September I will be starting work on a project called *The Map is not the Territory*. And so that is where everybody, all of the writers are given the same map but they get to write different adventures based on it. And that one is gonna be system agnostic so it's just gonna be like, here's an overview of the kind of adventure it is, drop it into your system and go nuts with it. So, I'm really excited for those.

DM Zack: That's really interesting, that last one there. What is it?

Sebastian: *The Map is not the Territory*? Yeah, I'm really excited for that one. I know what the map looks like and so for the pitch process, I was asked to give an idea and the whole thing is that it is an experimental dungeon crawl I suppose. And one of the questions was like "Really, how weird is your idea?" and I was like, "It's really outlandish."

DM Zack: That sounds super fun. And now I want to hit up on this Filipino lore, folklore one. So what kind of stuff is that about? Because that's interesting for sure. I don't know much about that kind of folklore.

Sebastian: Yeah absolutely, and neither did I when I started. It's been really, really fun to do. I've had particular, I've had a lot of fun writing some new spells based on like traditional stories and I've had a lot, like, so much fun making homebrew monsters based on those too. So, the draw to this is that it is, it's designed, it's kind of based on post-colonial Philippines and from a diasporic perspective. So myself and the rest of the people are also based in Canada and it's been super, super cool. We have some new classes, we have some new races, we have monsters, we have spells, and we have an adventure. It's kind of designed to introduce new players into D&D but with options inspired from those stories.

DM Zack: That's super interesting, you said that one was successfully funded, or was it...?

Sebastian: Yeah, that one was successfully funded, several times over actually.

DM Zack: Wow, congratulations.

Sebastian: Thank you. I can send you the page over on Kickstarter. I have a few things to send you.

DM Zack: Yeah please send me absolutely anything that you want linked in the show description and anything you just want to send me yourself because those flowcharts, I really want to see those

flowcharts.

Sebastian: Yeah for sure, absolutely.

DM Zack: So, well, Sebastian, thank you so much for coming and hanging out with me this afternoon. This was a lot of fun.

Sebastian: This was great! Thank you, thank you so much for having me.

DM Zack: No problem. So, with that, I will say goodbye.