



The Table Tabletop

A beautiful, awful game with my friends

Presentation by Thomas Franziska

Abstract/Introduction:
 In the wake of the Covid-19 Pandemic, my friends and I decided to start a tabletop roleplaying group to keep ourselves entertained. At the start we had no idea that the game would last over 3 years and consist of well over 100 6+ hour sessions.

Prior to starting, only a few members in the group had any experience with tabletop roleplaying games (trpgs). Being one of the few members with any prior experience, I decided to be the gamemaster (GM) and run the game. This was my first time running a game of any significant staying power, and it showed. While everyone was having fun, the game was an inconsistent mess, and I got to see how it evolved and changed into something I am proud of.

While tabletop roleplaying games are traditionally played in person, we opted to play our game online. This allowed us to play consistently throughout the pandemic, and when we live in different locations. It made scheduling much easier, something that's incredibly challenging when there are five members of the group whose schedules have to be taken into consideration.

The group itself consisted of myself, and my friends Jacob, Francis, Azmi, and Manuel. Every player ended up contributing a lot more than just engagement with the game. All of the players have ran at least one "one-shot" where they run a session of the game in a self-contained adventure. Multiple members of the group, specifically myself, Francis, have ran multiple one-shots. Regarding the running of the game, I was the GM for the first year and a half or so, with Francis stepping in for the rest of the game.

All of the members if the gamer are a joy to be around and have made significant contributions to the game. I would like to say several kind words to the people who made the game what it is.

Azmi: Azmi brings a level of moral complexity and ambiguity to the game. He makes every situation more interesting and entertaining. He is the wild-card, adding a bit of chaos to the game.

Francis: Francis is the other GM of the game, running it for its entire second half. He is very proficient with the production of the game, even making an NPC generator and spearheading the switch to foundry. When he plays, he is the leader to the party.

Jacob: Jacob is the man responsible for all the maps in the game. He is very levelheaded and practical player. He is the voice of reason for the group and a good moderator.

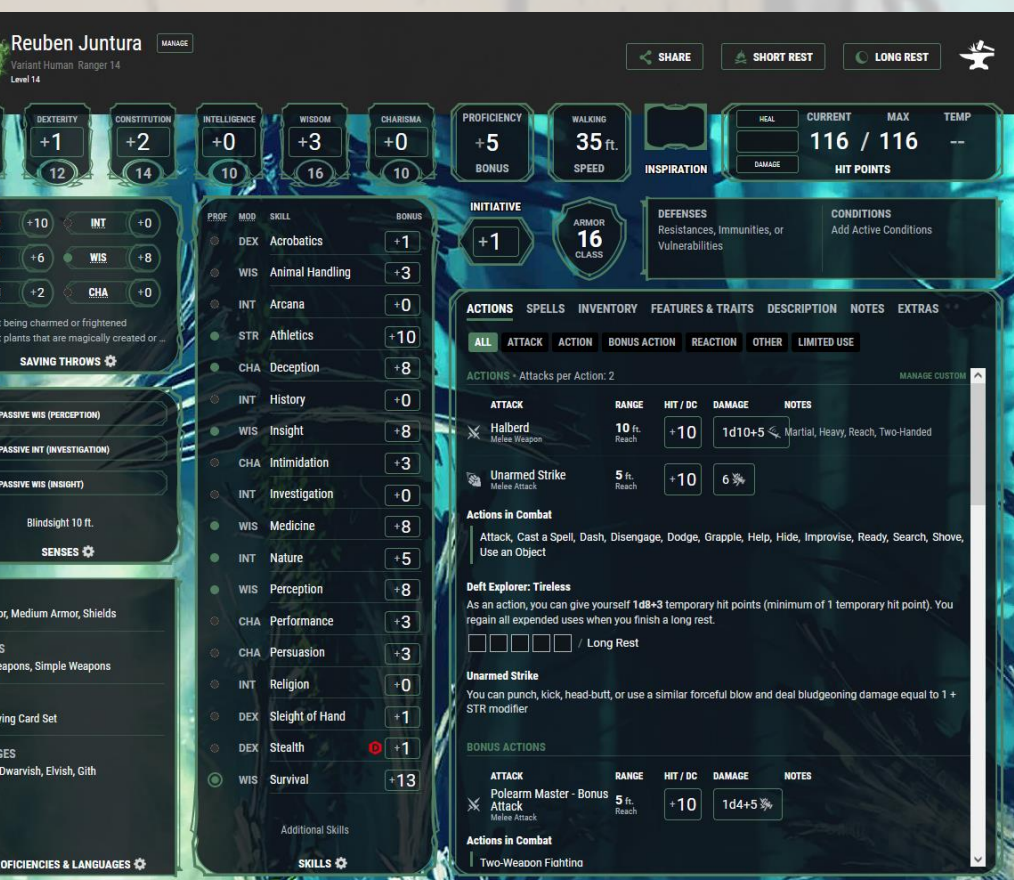
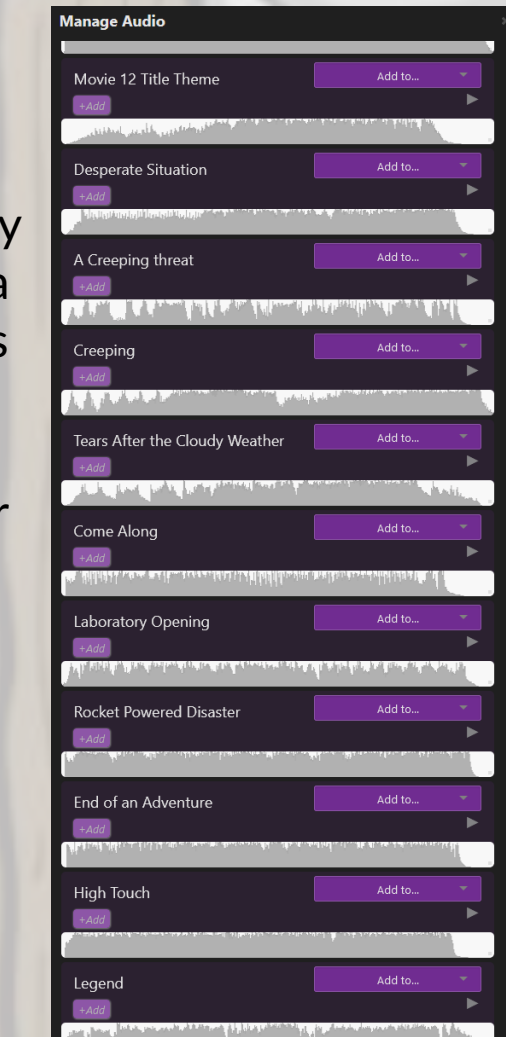
Manuel: Manuel is quiet and is always engaged with the game. He is the moral compass to the group. Additionally, he is a phenomenal artist, and is responsible for the vast majority of the art surrounding it.



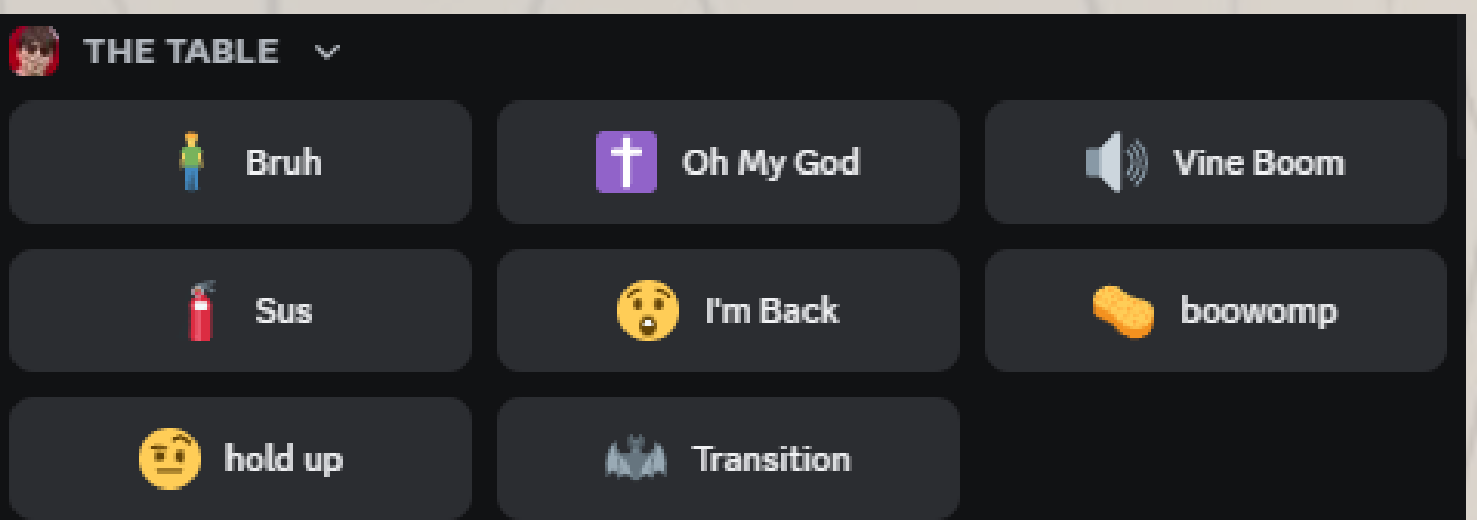
Above: A drawing of Liasatra, Leslie, Cross, and Ren (the party members)

Production Value:
 We started the game utilizing Roll20, an online virtual tabletop. This suited us well for over a year, until Francis decided to switch to using Foundry, another virtual tabletop, when he helmed the game. Everyone had gotten used to Roll20 at this point, with several players creating macros and shortcuts to execute their character's actions efficiently. The switch was well received as it allowed for so much more to be done, such as fully imported character sheets and animated dice rolls. D&D Beyond was used as an easy way to create and share our D&D 5e characters, although it was rarely used except for character leveling after foundry was implemented. The most recent addition to the game was the usage of a soundboard, where we play sounds to alter the tone of the game (and by that, I mean to joke around).

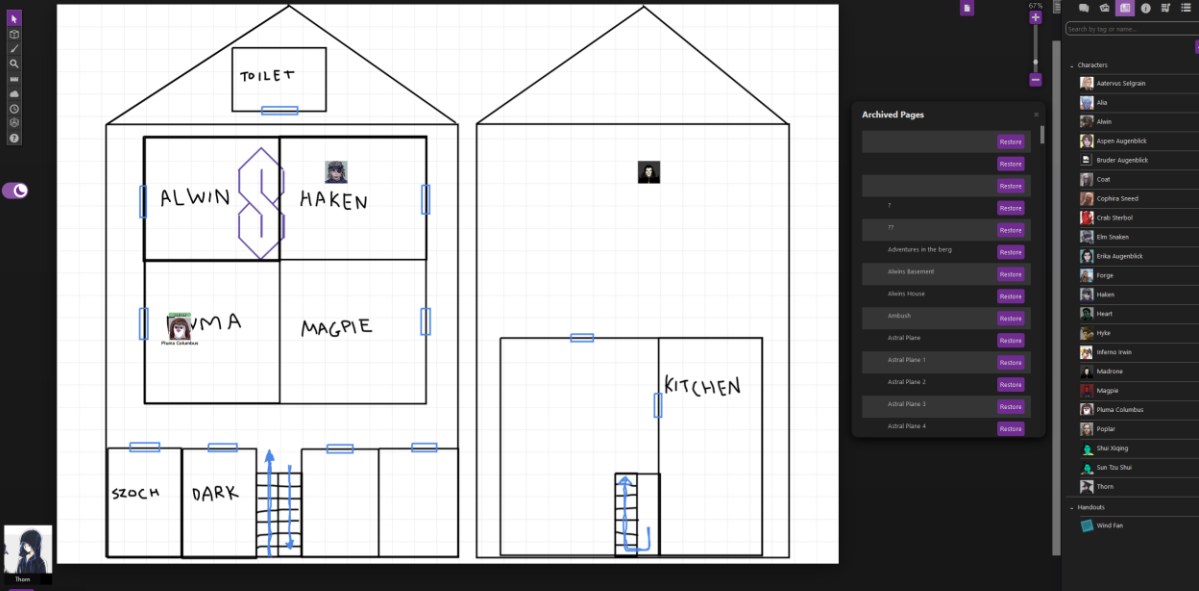
A valuable lesson I learned throughout the constant escalation of production value in this game was that this production value was not necessary in making the game good. While there were periods of time where I would spend a lot of time on maps and then music, all of that preparation paled in comparison to having good ideas for interesting game content. The maps and music utilized did help the game feel immersive, however using it for every single scenario proved unsustainable. Currently, we use a lot of premade maps for random encounters, custom maps during incredibly important scenes, but carry out the majority of the game in our imagination and conversation.



Above: D&D Beyond, the character creation website



Above: The recently adopted soundboard

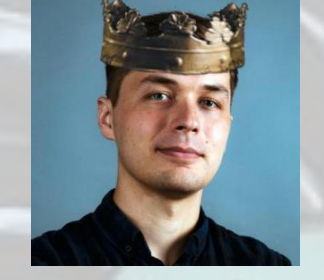



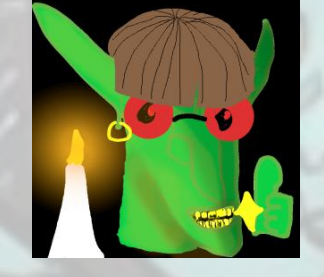


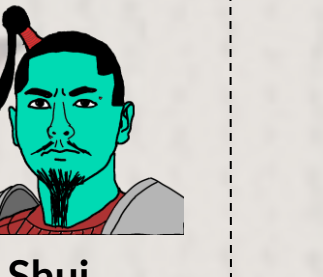
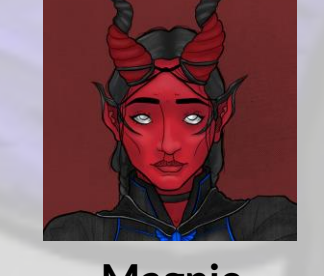
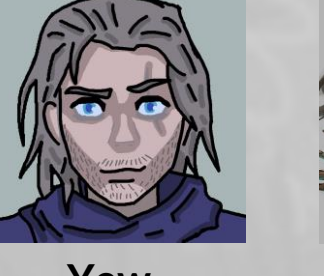
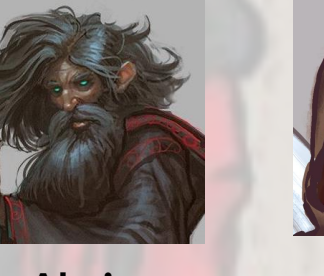
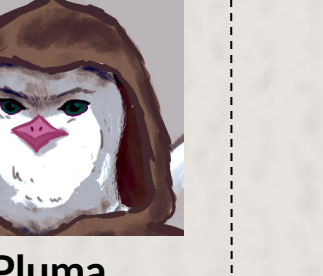


Above: Roll20, our original online tabletop program

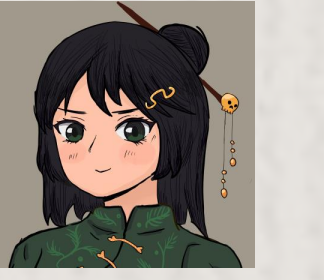


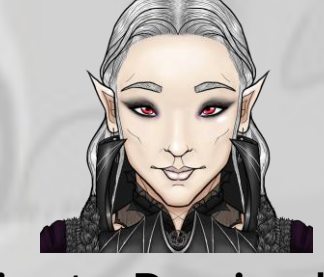



Above: Foundry, our current online tabletop program

Player Characters:

 Edouard Manet	 Inferno Irwin	 Elm Haken	 Madrone
 Bogzlix	 Fat Tony	 Bruder Augenblick	 Shui
 Magpie	 Yew Haken	 Alwin	 Pluma Columbus

These are all the main characters of the game, excluding all the characters created for one-shots. All of them have had significant time in the game, and have their own goals and aspirations.

 Ren Zhong'e (綠綠娥) A necromancer who seeks to achieve immortality	 Cross A sharpshooter who wishes to free himself of genie's contract
 Leslie Marcoos Fairfax A strange barbarian who wants to kill the evil wizard Alwin	 Liasatra Daepinephro A vampire cleric who searches for her daughter
 Diecivier Dicodrul An agent on a mission to dismantle a trafficking operation	

Storytelling:
 Through the game, I was able to see how my friends not only played the game, but also run it. Azmi and Manuel only ran one or two one shots, and Jacob ran three. Francis and I ran multiple, and both had out stint running the entire game. The game saw my personal style of running the game develop and change, specifically in my priorities. As my time with the game went on, I was more and more focused on the narrative and roleplaying elements as opposed to the mechanical ones.

The game has been a lot of fun, but it also has been a source of negative emotions. There were times when running the game I felt pressured by the expectations of the players, and that I was not running the game well enough. There were also instances where I could not help but get hurt by the actions of the other players. Fortunately, I was able to work my way through these, and adjusted the game accordingly. This problem was noticeably at its highest because of the high production value of the game.

I have a lot of misgivings about the system we chose to run the game in, D&D 5e. The more we used the game, the less I liked its combat and roleplaying elements. I think that the magic of the game came in spite of the system its run in, not because of it.

Francis and I were shown to have very different GM style. Francis is very focused on the decisions being made by the players, and the mechanics of the game. I run very narrative-focused sessions with less focus on mechanics and a lot of emphasis on interactions with NPCs. We both emphasize the roleplay in our games. At least for me, my way of GM-ing was developed through this game, after many sessions of rules lawyering and hours-long combat.

Maps:
 Jacob created all three worldmaps used in the campaign. These maps were used when the player characters were traveling, or when there was no specific map for the scene. While the players traveled from named location to named location in the first two maps, the third was different, utilizing hexes and the general lack of labels to focus on exploration. Traveling also required more effort, with possible random encounters with monsters and the chance of getting lost. Francis, who is currently running the game, updates the map of Lenoramica to reflect any changes it has undergone, such as the forest fire and the encroaching shadowlands in the bottom right.



Above: The second location of the game, The Windy Coast



Above: Cross' inn, The Crossroads



Above: The third location of the game, Lenoramica

Character Art:

My character, Leslie Fairfax had the most major design changes of player characters so far. A gimmick of the character was that he always wears non-hat objects. I would create a new design after a fitting change in direction of the story or a progression in his character.

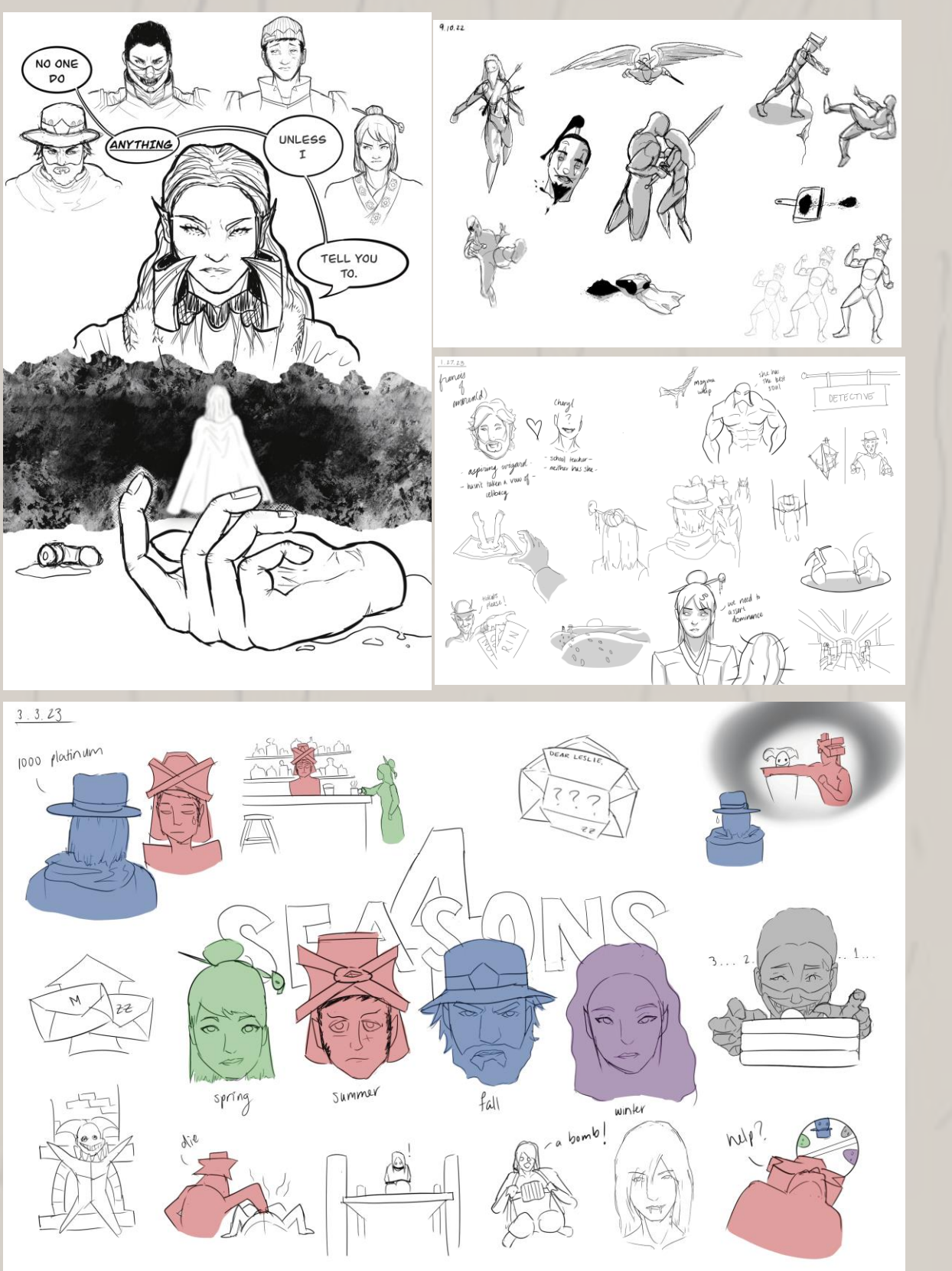
The evolution of Leslie's original "Helmet" design.

I obviously did not make this one

A bunch of unused or alternate Leslie designs. Most of these were used only a couple of times, or used for Leslie's clone, Cloneslie.

Throughout the campaign, the design of player characters changed, sometimes subtly, sometimes not. Inferno Irwin starts out with a stock photo, and received two drawn designs after the character was used. Regarding Elm Haken, his first two pictures were drawn and were used while the character was a player character, and the second two pictures were traced and were used when the character was a non-player character. Although the switch from drawing to tracing does not reflect a change in art style, it reflects how the character itself has changed throughout the events of the story. Liasatra's design is an example of how the design slowly changed over a couple years of usage, slowly adopting changes until it is much more detailed.

Post-game sketches:
 In the most recent section of the game, Manuel shared post-game drawing of several of the most memorable moments of the session. These are incredibly cool and really highlight what I find the most fun about the game: interactions between the players and the world. They are the closest thing to a taste of what the game is like. Even though they are only sketches from an incredibly talented artist, they really highlight to me why the game is so special.



Conclusion:
 This game is very important to me, being the game that made trpgs a major passion of mine. Although it has been a mess, it has provided many glorious and chaotic memories. The game shows how the art and storytelling of myself and my friends have subtly or drastically changed throughout the years. It also functions as a showcase of all the art, maps, production elements, and sheer creativity the group has done.

The game is not over yet, but is definitely at its end, with all of us willing to pursue different games or projects once it has wrapped up.

In addition to all the technical and artistic aspects of the game, it has a lot of value emotionally. The game allowed me to consistently spend time with my friends, even in times of stress and separation. It allowed us to create a world, characters, and play together. For that, and much more, it is something I will always look back on fondly.

Misc. Artwork/creations:

THE TABLE
 TABELTOP GAME

The Invention of Champions

THE LITTLE TOURNEY (on a map)

DRIP COLUMBUS

THE TRIP BOYS