

The Adventure Zone Primer: Where To Start?

Published on October 12th, 2021

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[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello everyone! We are the McElroys, the hosts of The Adventure Zone, and if you're brand new to The Adventure Zone, you know, listen: there are podcasts out there, folks. A lot of them. More every day, it seems like. And whenever someone tells me, "Oh, you gotta check out this show, aw man you'd love this," and then I look and I see that there's like, hundreds of episodes, I have no idea where to start.

Justin: So overwhelming. I never know where to begin. So hi, I'm Justin.

Travis: What?

Justin: Uh, what we thought would be a fun thing to do would be to suggest to you where you might start with The Adventure Zone. Let's give you the— before we get to that, very quick pitch. Griffin, what is The Adventure Zone?

Griffin: Hi, this is Griffin McElroy. It's a actual play show. If you're listening to this, you probably know what that means, but if not, we—

Justin: Why? Why would they— why on earth would they not listen to our show, but know of the genre?

Clint: Tabula rasa, man, tabula rasa.

Justin: Tabula rasa, yeah, thank you dad.

Clint: Hi, I'm Clint.

Justin: "I say tabula rasa on the show." That's Dad's function.

Griffin: Uh— I— it means we actually play. Games. And tell stories and do jokes and, uh, have fun as a family. And you can join in on that. The fun. Not the family part. We're— that's probably not gonna happen.

Justin: That's— yeah, all openings are closed currently. [laughs]

Griffin: Yeah, yeah.

Justin: We are not accepting new...

Travis: I would also say, if you're saying, like, "What makes you guys different from other actual play podcasts and shows and stuff?" We don't so much worry about the mechanics of the game so much as we focus on story and mostly trying to make each other laugh. Or frustrate each other. It's one of those two, often.

And the thing is we've done multiple different stories. We haven't just stuck with, you know, one storyline or one set of characters. And so, uh, the good news is for you, if you're looking for a place to start, you have a lot of different options. Now, you know, perhaps you would think that the obvious place to start is to just start at the beginning and go on, but I thought maybe we could take turns, Justin you suggested.

Justin: Yes.

Travis: If you were going to start— say if a friend of yours was like, "I've been thinking about listening to The Adventure Zone, where should I start?" What would you tell them?

Justin: Uh, okay. So, personally I would pick up with Ethersea. When you're looking at the show, you're going to see different what we call arcs. And those are completely separate stories. Some are longer stories that take dozens of episodes, some are very short stories that take one, or maybe a few. The one that we're doing right now is called Ethersea.

We're playing a game called— oh, excuse me, "Dungeons and Dragons". Sort of a modified version of it. It begins with a prologue where we play a game called The Quiet Year designed by Avery Alder, and what— Ethersea is the story of basically a city that is drawn to the oceans by an apocalypse and are carving out a new life for themselves below the sea. And it's about three adventurers, a lot of the arcs end up being about three adventurers because there's four of us—

Travis: Yeah, yeah.

Justin: And the other person has to be the boss, or Game Master, if you prefer. So, it's about three adventurers that are discovering sort of a— building their relationship and looking for their fortune underneath the ocean. It's cool, we'll still kinda figuring it out. We've just recorded our, I think, eleventh or twelfth episode as you're listening to this. So, we're still kinda figuring it out and it's the thing that most people are listening to right now and talking about. So, if you wanna be part of the ongoing conversation, just catch up, I would personally start by catching up with Ethersea and then just getting those new episodes weekly as they are released. It's a fun story so far, and like I said, it's still very nascent, but I think if you wanna start listening right now, that's what I would do.

Travis: Now, I might suggest if you're looking— maybe your friend is like, "I don't wanna commit to a whole arc, like a whole thing, and I'm not really interested in gameplay so much as I just wanna be entertained," I would check out, uh, we did a one-episode kind of arc, if you can call it that, it's a one-shot based on a game system that we designed [laughs quietly] ourselves.

Clint: [laughs]

Travis: That we ended up calling Dadlands. In which we all play different kinds of dads in a post-apocalyptic wasteland run by different dad factions. So you have like, your Disney Dad and your Car Dad and... I'm trying to remember—

Clint: Coach Dad.

Travis: Coach Dad...

Griffin: I was the Grilling Dad.

Travis: The Grilling Dad. And that was run by Brennan Lee Mulligan of— you probably know from Dimension 20. He is another person in the actual play community. And we made that game ourself with some help from Jenn Ellis and Keith Baker of Twogether studios. And it is very light on mechanics, very light on worrying about how a game works, and mostly focuses on just being silly. So if you have a friend who's not really interested in RPGs, that's a pretty good place to start.

Griffin: Um, the first arc we did, the first thing we did, the first episode of The Adventure Zone takes place in an arc called Balance, which is our longest arc and probably the story we are known most for, because we're releasing a graphic novel adaption that we're up to book... five? Of?

Clint: Four is out, five is coming.

Griffin: I see, I see. And yeah, I think the reason that might be a good starting point, despite the fact that maybe it's a little intimidating because of its length— it's 69 episodes.

Clint: [giggles]

Griffin: Which is really good.

Justin: So nice.

Clint: Nice.

Griffin: It is really us learning how to play Dungeons and Dragons while we play it, because none of us really had experience with RPGs like this before we started doing Adventure Zone. Adventure Zone actually started out as a bonus episode for My Brother, My Brother and Me, another show that we do. So, if you're coming at this completely fresh, starting at Balance not only sort of familiarizes you with our most-known story, it will also teach you the rules of Dungeons and Dragons, because God almighty did it take us a while to reach a level of, I'll say, competence?

Travis: Yeah.

Griffin: Pseudo-competence with it.

Justin: That's a very nice way of putting it, Griffin.

Travis: Like a loose, slippery grasp. You know? Our hands are covered in some sort of butter...

Griffin: Precisely, yes.

Clint: ... maybe familiarity might be a better term?

Travis: That might be a little too forgiving.

Griffin: Right.

Clint: For me, I think a really good starting point is the beginning of Amnesty. Amnesty is what we technically refer to as our second season, and it uses the Monster of the Week, by Evil Hat. It was very atmospheric, very evocative. If you're into cryptozoic stuff and kinda spooky... kinda, I would say, urban fear, urban—

Travis: I mean, Monster of the Week is right there, right? So like a Supernatural, or Charmed or Buffy or something like that.

Clint: And it was a different kind of game system for us, in which we had some— the characters had some familiarity with each other, but at the same time they kinda were discovering about themselves, and like I said, it was really spooky but a lot of fun. It really felt to me like we were really hitting our stride in Amnesty and, you know, we have some big milestones in there.

Griffin: Sure.

Clint: I mean, people— people died—

Travis: Whoa!

Griffin: Whoa, what?

Justin: Spoilers.

Clint: Well, I didn't say who.

Justin: I would mention though, that it— if you wanna start with Amnesty, Amnesty started when we were doing like, some shorter runs, so you're gonna wanna go for the— like, there's a chunk of them earlier than you'll see the actual episodes start. Does that make sense?

Griffin: Yes.

Clint: Yeah.

Justin: Is that the best way of explaining that? So, when you think you see the beginning of it, scroll back just a little bit, because there were a couple that we were doing in like, trial runs, and that is the one that we ended up doing.

Clint: We also did a bonus show, we did a live show, the Ballad of Bigfoot, which was an Amnesty story.

Justin: Oh, yeah.

Clint: Based on Oh Dang, Bigfoot Stole My Car With My Friend's Birthday Present Inside, designed by Paul Ettin.

Justin: [wheeze-laughs]

Travis: Yeah, that's— let's be clear, that's the name of the game system and it's incredible.

Griffin: It's an incredible game.

Travis: We've played a couple one-shots that I just wanna touch on real quick. We did Hootenanny, where— the first one of that we did on the stage at the Ryman auditorium in Nashville, which was the previous home of the Grand Ole Opry, and so that was like our first kind of— we sang in that one, which was new for us in front of an audience.

Clint: With them good family harmonies!

Travis: Indeed.

Griffin: Sure, yeah.

Travis: And that was playing a game system called Lasers and Feelings designed by John Harper and The Doubleclicks. There's actually a virtual live show of that coming up November 5th that we're doing where you'll actually watch the video of us playing, so if that sounds interesting to you, you can go check out that first episode. And the second episode of that is actually in the Max Fun Drive bonus content feed, so you can find that there.

And I know it's my own game but if you like something a little grittier and a little old west-y, might I recommend Dust. A game called Urban Shadows designed by Magpie Games, and it's about like, an old west kind of like alt-reality in which there are humans and vampires and werewolves and ghosts and demons. And I ran that one and had a great time doing it and it's just— it's a little bit more— I would say it has kind of a, uh, similar, I don't know, I mean, Serenity and Firefly? Can I say that? Has a little bit of that feel to it? Except not like, sci-fi.

Griffin: So not really like it much. At all.

Travis: No, yeah, I guess the old west-y part of it.

Griffin: Okay. I get that, yeah. And once you get deep into it, man there's so much waiting for you on the other side. An incredible community of amazing people, um, just so many merch—

Clint: A lot of fan art.

Travis: Oh, yeah.

Griffin: A lot of merch. And merch, though. The merch is what we really—

Justin: The merchandise is a real profit center.

Clint: [laughs quietly]

Justin: Should people— also, like, if you wanna start with Balance, also, we have a graphic novel based on Balance that would be a fine— like, if you wanted to get going quickly on something, that would be a fine place to start too, is reading the graphic novel. It's sort of like a boiled-down version of what we did in that podcast arc that'll take you a lot less time, if you're in the mood to just get crankin' on it. Um...

Clint: And the cool thing about the graphic novels is, while it is where we, you know, kind of boiled down the story, it's expanded because it's bigger, because the art by the amazing Carey Pietsch makes it bigger. And you've got so much to look at and it's absolutely a ton of fun—

Griffin: A feast! A feast for the senses!

Clint: A feast, a visual feast.

Travis: One more thing, though, I do wanna say. Maybe you've listened, like, [through laughter] none of this has been interesting to you at all. At all. Absolutely. Totally get it. I would make one pitch though, to check out the music of The Adventure Zone. Because it has been, I will brag on my little brother for a minute, some of the most amazing stuff to come out of us doing it. Griffin makes original music for episodes and those have done, like— people love them, right? They have been much beloved and there are some real absolute jams in there. And so, if that sounds interesting to you, totally check that out. If you just like, search for the music of The Adventure Zone, you will find it and it's really good.

Griffin: So, that's— I feel like you are now equipped with everything you need to know. Uh, no matter where you start, as long as you do start, that would be fantastic.

Travis: That would be nice!

Griffin: Yeah.

Justin: Yeah, we'd really like that.

Griffin: We hope that you like it and like us.

Justin: We worked hard on it.

Griffin: Yeah.

Justin: So, just, please love it.

Travis: Yeah, just be nice about it. Well, Dad phones it in.

Clint: [laughs]

Justin: I been working hard on it. I don't know what the other guys are doing. I'm working hard.

Travis: I'm working on it really hard. We— yeah.

Justin: I'm working on it in the background, here.

Griffin: Sure.

Justin: I can't even focus on what's going on.

Griffin: If you are— if you for some reason want more granular information on the show than this—

Justin: Impossible.

Griffin: You can go to bit.ly/TAZreference and that's got a bunch of sorta supplementary details about the show. So—

Travis: Oh, and we just recently started releasing episode weekly.

Griffin: Yeah.

Travis: So that's a new thing, for a long time, years and years and years, we were doing every other week. Now, it's weekly. So you have even more reason to listen.

Griffin: Catch the wave.

Travis: Yeah. Get on board. Choo choo.

Justin: Oh, and if you start one of those arcs, don't Google around about it. Cause you never know— I mean, that's probably self-explanatory, right? But like, I don't know.

Griffin: Big spoileys, yeah.

Travis: There might be spoileys out there.

Justin: There's spoileys, yeah. There's spoileys. Okay, that's it. Oh, aren't there two versions of the first episode of Balance?

Travis: Yeah. There's, uh—

Justin: Should we clarify?

Clint: There are?!

Travis: Yeah, so there's one episode that is like three hours long or something, and then if you find episode 1.5, that is cutting down a lot of like, discussion about rules and flipping through pages of books and what-not to just get the story—

Justin: Yeah, we didn't know we were gonna do more of 'em. [laughs]

Clint: [laughs]

Griffin: Okay, you little scamp. Get out of here.

Travis: Go, listen.

Griffin: And listen to our show. And—

Justin: Yeah, 1.5, you know, 2x, whatever you need to do. Chug through it. You know, as long as you get that merch crankin', [laughs] get ready to disagree, it doesn't matter what you— there's no wrong place to start as long as it ends at mcelroymerch.com!

Travis: Yeah!

Griffin: Alright, bye.

[theme music fades in]

Justin: Adventure, ahoy. We say that in every episode.

Griffin: Yeah, that's true.

Clint: We do?

Travis: Yup.

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