Stories from the Hellfire Club.

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A conversation with artist **Butcher Billy** and **Wizards of the Coast's Justice Ramin Arman** (D&D's Managing Game Designer) on the stories, style, and inspiration behind the Dungeons & Dragons x *Stranger Things: Welcome to the Hellfire Club* box set, which hit shelves on October 7.

Check out Billy's artwork here: https://www.butcherbilly.com/

Stranger Things: Welcome to the Hellfire Club is available now on D&D Beyond.

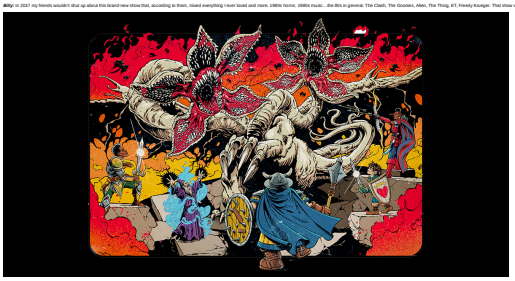
Hi! Tell us about yourselves.

Billy: I'm Butcher Billy and I'm a graphic designer turned pop artist/illustrator – and the artist behind *Stranger Things: Welcome to the Hellfire Club*.

Justice: My name is Justice Ramin Arman. I lead the Dungeons & Dragons Game Design Team at Wizards of the Coast. I am also the Lead Game Designer on *Stranger Things: Welcome to the Hellfire Club*.

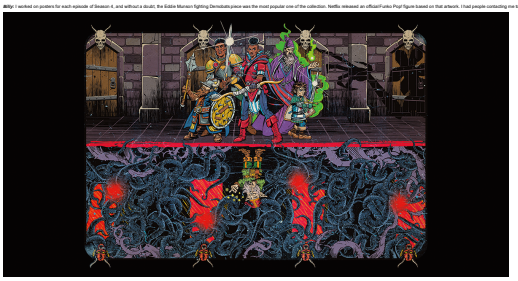
Billy, how did you first get involved with *Stranger Things*?

Billy: In 2017 my friends wouldn't shut up about this brand-new show that, according to them, mixed everything I ever loved and more. 1980s horror, 1980s music…the 80s in general. The Clash, The Goonies, Alien, The Thing, IT, Freedy Krueger. That show was *Stranger Things*, so I started watching it and immediately I wanted to draw pop art pieces based on it. I spent some time doing that and posting online, and around the second season I was contacted by Netflix. They told me the Duffer Brothers were fans of my work and that there were some of my pieces hanging on the walls of the writers' room.



The *Stranger Things* box set has such an evocative visual style. What emotions or themes were you trying to capture?

Billy: I worked on posters for each episode of Season 4, and without a doubt, the Eddie Munson fighting Demobats piece was the most popular one of the collection. Netflix released an official Funko Pop! figure based on that artwork. I had people contacting me to show that they tattooed the art on their bodies, which was pretty crazy! For *Stranger Things: Welcome to the Hellfire Club*, I made sure to channel that original piece and treat the whole project as an expansion of it, using the same style, colors, textures and overall vibe.



In designing *Stranger Things: Welcome to the Hellfire Club*, how did you merge two powerful storytelling worlds without one overshadowing the other?

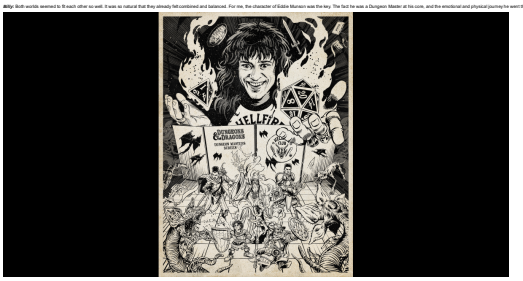
Justice: There's a delicate balance to strike for sure. With this set, we wanted to create an authentic experience for fans of both brands.

For the products art and graphic design, **Kara Kenna** (Franchise Creative Director, D&D), **Kate Irwin** (Principal Art Director, D&D), and **Trish Nachum** (Principal Graphic Designer, D&D) were instrumental in driving this sense of face-straight. Opening the box feels like travelling back in time. You have cards that evoke 1980s war-pack goodies, "slideshow" covers that look like they've been well loved, and a gorgeous DM screen with art by **Trevor Girard**, who illustrated the Hellfire Club logo we see on shirts worn by Eddie and other members of Hellfire on the show – and now fans all over the world. The poster maps illustrated by **Stacey Allan** and **Will Doyle** are also a standout. Will and Stacy are longtime D&D fans and took great inspiration from older editions of D&D. This is particularly evident in the dead embellishments along the border of the map for the last adventure, "Devil, Metal, Die!"

On the game design side, we worked with two freelance designers—**Anthony Joyce-Rivera** and **Taylor Navarro**—along with the folks over at Netflix to create a suite of adventures that brought out the best of both worlds. It was important to us that players, especially ones who have seen every season of *Stranger Things*, weren't just experiencing the plot beats they'd seen on the show. Though there are certainly references to memorable events and beloved characters, they've been through the lens of D&D, giving players agency to shape their own stories. Of course, the players get to channel Hellfire Club characters like Erica Sinclair's rogue, Lady Applejack, with these awesome, 1980s-inspired character sheets on paper reminiscent of the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons goldenrod sheets.

D&D and *Stranger Things* complement each other wonderfully.

Billy: Both worlds seemed to fit each other so well. It was so natural that they already felt combined and balanced. For me, the character of Eddie Munson was the key. The fact he was a Dungeon Master at his core, and the emotional and physical journey he went through in the show reflected a campaign so much.



Justice: Eddie Munson has a unique aesthetic and DMing style. In addition to the visuals throughout the set, Eddie's voice pervades the adventures. He gives advice to newer DMs hoping to form their own Hellfire Clubs, but he does so in an unapologetically Eddie-way. Eddie is a metalhead and a little rough around the edges, but he's also a big sweetheart. We channeled Eddie's wholesome irreverence in notes across the four adventures, in which Eddie encourages DMs to do their best with practical advice—and, at times, a dash of tough love.

D&D design = Math + Psychology + Narrative. Justice, what do you rely on most?

Justice: They're definitely all important, but if I had to pick one, I'd go with narrative. In the tabletop industry, the term "game design" might call to mind things like damage per round, dice-based probabilities, or game statistics in a creature stat block. However, without a compelling narrative framework, all you have is math! That's why on the D&D TRPG team, our game designers do both mechanical and narrative design. Consistently, game mechanics informed by strong narrative themes resonate with players more than crunch for the crunch's sake, even when that crunch is balanced and functional. As designers, we constantly ask ourselves, "Is this added complexity worth the fun?"

Billy, how do you stay on top of today's cultural trends while also delivering fresh, standout work?

Billy: I actually try to spend some time away from the mindless internet rabbit holes. It all begins with reading books, watching movies and series, listening to a lot of music, playing a lot of games, watching the news, and catching up on world events. I like to overcharge myself with loads of inspiration from very different areas of things I like and let that take its course. It takes a lot longer to come up with an idea for a single piece or an art series than the actual execution of it. The aim is to have the work completely ready in my head, before I even start sketching it. Once I have that, the goal is to make it striking yet simple.

Justice, what advice would you give to someone designing their first D&D campaign at home?

Justice: Start small, be flexible, and don't feel like you need to have everything planned out. In my experience, players want to have choices, and they want those choices to matter. Sometimes that choice can be as simple as, "Which of these two doors do you want to go through?"

Once you have an overarching conflict or villain in mind, think about the most important beats of your campaign. If it was a three-act play, where might each act begin and end? What choices might define those acts? Have two or three options prepared for each of those, along with what might happen depending on what the characters do. Be prepared to abandon or adjust those options when the players do unexpected things. (They will.)

Lastly, listen to your players and lean into the stories they want to tell, too. If they all have fun, I promise you will, too.

<Lightning Round >
When do you feel most creatively energized?

Billy: I'm completely useless creatively while I'm hungry or craving coffee :)

If you had to convince someone to give D&D a try using only a potion from the game, which one would you choose?

Justice: Potion of Flying. Just make sure to land before it wears off!

If you could host a dinner party with 3 artists, living or dead, who would you invite?

Billy: Keith Haring, Banksy and René Magritte.

If your art could act as a spell in D&D, what would it do?

Billy: I'm gonna take inspiration from an old episode of Amazing Stories called The Mission, and also the Green Lantern. It would certainly be the ability to draw anything and it will turn into a real thing, like energy constructs that I can use to fight and help with my survivor needs.

What do you do when you're not playing (or making) D&D?

Justice: I'm in month four of a six-month Blues Immersion course through Justin Guitar. I try to practice every day. I also enjoy baking and cooking, especially for friends.