

The world twisted and turned. Everything was dark. Everything hurt. It felt cold and warm at the same time. Finn was confused, and for a moment, all he could do was take it all in. Waiting, hoping that the world stopped turning. And it did, slowly, gradually. At some point, Finn realised that the world was dark because his eyes were closed. So he opened them. Light assaulted him, and a migraine flashed at his temples. Finn winced and quickly closed them again, groaning.

Slowly, his memory began coming back, replaying what had happened to him in the past few minutes. At the same time, he began to realise that the coldness he felt was from the wet cobblestone underneath him. He groaned as he recalled the past few moments: him, partying with his friends, loud music, drinks. They were all in a jolly good mood. The academic year had ended. Their finals were finally over, and this called for a celebration. The night had started great, and up until ten minutes ago, had stayed great. But then Mark, one of his friends, bumped into another partygoer. Mark apologised, smiled, and toasted to the stranger, and that should have been all. But the stranger had been drinking all night as well, perhaps more than them. And to him, that had been certainly not all. He had taken Mark by the shoulders and given him a headbutt. James stepped up and pushed the man away. Two others came at James, and Finn had stepped in as well, trying to push the men away with James as their other friends looked after Mark, who was on the floor. While Finn was trying to calm the two men down, the first one came back and punched him. It was a hard punch, coming from just outside of his vision, which took him by surprise. The blow connected with his jaw and sent him flying to the ground. And that was where he was laying now.

He could hear his friends and others arguing. He heard loud voices, yelling, some cries as well. Finn registered it all in a haze, and while he should be alarmed, he felt a certain serenity. Everything felt muffled and distant, even the pain. He knew he should try to get up and help his friends, but as he laid there, eyes closed, he saw something. The world was dark and should entirely be dark, but he saw something in the bottom-right corner of his eye, something tiny and red, pulsating in hue. Had it been there before? Did the punch mess up his eye? Finn tried to look at it, and to his surprise, it seemed to get bigger when he did so. When he looked away, it shrunk again. He kept looking at it, which allowed it to grow larger. It was a plus sign. It kept growing as he focused on it. Then, a circle popped up behind it,

growing large quickly and fading, colouring the blackness of the world with a matte grey.

If he had proper control of his body, he would have yelped and jolted back. But the most he could do now was probably just a shudder. The matte grey felt nicer to his eyes than the black, but it lasted only a moment.

A tree made up of boxes and icons slowly appeared in front of the grey. At the very top was a line of seven icons, larger than those underneath them. While the others were dark grey like disabled web application features, these icons were colored white. Finn read over them from left to right. Strength, Agility, Health, Intelligence, Wisdom, Arcana, and Piety.

Above those stood a rectangular box with a golden border. The text inside flashed and pulsated in a bright, red colour. "Twenty-three points." As it was all starting to make a bit of sense to Finn. A textbox suddenly appeared in front of everything.

*Congratulations on activating the Player system. Activation took you approximately 95.86 percent less time than the average Player. Now that you have unlocked this system, you will be able to see your experience, progress, skills and various information systems. If you need extra guidance, do not hesitate to access the built-in wiki. However, keep in mind that the wiki is limited on purpose.* Then, in a smaller font underneath it: *The yearly talent point allowance has now been cancelled. Further talent points will need to be acquired through experience gain and skill development.*

Finn groaned and gasped. Was he going mad? Insane? It did not matter. He discovered that by focussing on a skill, he could enlarge it. When he made it large enough, a small plus icon appeared, allowing him to invest one of the points into the skill. Screw it! His friends needed him, and if this was anything near real, he could use it. He assigned two points each to Strength and Agility. The first thing he noticed was that the pain, the migraine, the twisting world, all went away. Instantly.

Nice.

Then, he tried to get up, and to his surprise, everything went more smoothly than usual. He basically jumped up. His body felt invigorated. With a grin, Finn walked over to his friends. The largest of the other men was holding Mark by his shoulders, shaking him roughly and violently. Finn put his hand on one of the

man's wrists, squeezed it, and tried to pull it away. To everybody's surprise, the big man yelped, and Finn easily moved his hand away from Mark's shoulder.

The man sized up Finn, clearly wondering what just had happened. "So, you want another one, huh?" His voice was just as strong as before. But, for the briefest of moments, Finn thought he could hear a hint of doubt in it. He couldn't help but grin. The man did not like this at all, and before Finn could even reply, his fist swung out again, aiming at Finn's jaw. Unlike before, this time Finn's hand shot up and caught the man's fist in mid-air, stopping it dead in its tracks. Both of them were surprised by this. Finn's hand had moved out of instinct or perhaps because of the points he had recently invested. The result was that the man kept desperately trying to wedge his fist free while Finn needed little effort to keep him trapped.

Finn could see the surprise and disbelief in the man's eyes. He also saw how he was preparing his other fist. But, before the man tried to punch again, Finn squeezed and exerted pressure on his fist. Finn could feel his fingers dig in and felt the man's hand creaking and trembling under his solid grip.

The man's composure quickly deteriorated as the pain increased. Soon enough, the man was screaming out loud and begging Finn to release him. Finn did not release the man, partly because he was still amazed by everything that was happening and partly because he felt exhilarated by it all. Powerful. The feelings clouded his mind a little, and he lost himself for a moment. But, when he felt the man's hand suddenly crack and a knuckle dislocate, he quickly released as the man yelped loudly in pain. As soon as he let go, the man yanked his hand back and rubbed it, throwing an angry, teary-eyed glare up at Finn.

"Just leave us alone, got it?" Finn's voice shook with adrenaline, as it came out a little more high-pitched than what he would have liked. But the man seemed to understand the situation, as did his friends. He stood up, and they left while throwing glares at Finn and his friends.

Finn's friends gathered around him and patted him on the back. They were both amazed and amused by him, and the mood was fully restored. They left the party and went to a night shop to get some cold cans of drink so Finn and others who took some punches could press it against their faces. None of them were hurt beyond some bruises and slight swelling, which helped them all stay on a happy high. The remainder of the night became a daze for Finn, though; he would hardly be able to recall anything of it. All he could think about was what had happened and occasionally the small plus icon. The 'overview' opened each time, without fail.

They drank, celebrated, and boasted to each other about the fight. All praised Finn, of course, and the story of the night was already getting changed to sound more and more brave and astounding. However, the only thing on Finn's mind was the realisation that this had all been real – that this 'system' of sorts was real. He knew it because of how he defeated the man who should have been able to toy with him. He now saw two thin red and green lines at the bottom of his vision, which grew thicker when he focussed on them. 'Health' and 'Experience' they read. And to the left of his vision, he saw two small cubes, coloured and filled with text. 'Exhilarated' and 'Drunk'. It all was far too familiar. His life had become a game now it seemed. And Finn was trying to decide if this was a good or bad thing as the night continued.

The night ended late, but even in his bed, Finn couldn't fall asleep. His mind still racing. Mark had gone to his bedroom and promptly fallen asleep. Finn wanted to do the same, but a part of him refused. It was his curious side, and it always won. Laying on his back, he opened the overview again. He already could tell he was growing accustomed to the sensation of his vision blurring and having things pop up on top of it. Navigating the system was becoming more natural as well, like he was starting to develop muscle memory for it.

Where the interface had looked somewhat weird at first in his hasty glances, now that he took the time for it, it made a lot more sense. At the top was a box that showed him his remaining 'talent' points, which were something akin to skill points, he reasoned. Underneath it was a small portrait that filled the remainder of the box. It resembled him incredibly closely and detailed. Underneath that was some more text that read 'Finn'.

From that box, a thin line sprouted. It went down and then split up into a horizontal line from which sprouted a set of seven vertical lines. These lines led to similar boxes that were his base skills. The boxes read Strength, Agility, Health, Intelligence, Wisdom, Arcana, and Piety. Underneath their titles were numeric values, their current levels, and underneath the boxes more lines sprouted. These lines divided down into a tree with plenty of more divisions and boxes. But all of these were greyed out to such an extent that Finn could not read any of them. The images, if they had any, were blurred on top of that as well. All of these were, Finn assumed, disabled skills he had yet to unlock.

So he returned his focus to the first line of basic skills. He could see that most of them had been at five points or levels. His intelligence was at six, which he understood somewhat. He had always been one of the smart ones back in highschool. And now in college, he still was one of the top performers among his peers. His Strength and Agility were both at seven now. With the two points he had invested in each of them, this meant they had started at five. His Piety was five as well, and his Arcana a zero. He had never been very religious and aside from a video game now and then, he had never dabbled in the occult either.

The box at the top telling him that he had nineteen points remaining that he could spend as he saw fit, he started to read through the text underneath the basic skills. As he did, he noticed that by focusing on them, they enlarged and showed him more text. Some greyed out tabs appeared to the side as well, indicating there was more to them to be unlocked as well. Most of the supplied text was self-explanatory and superfluous. At least to Finn it was. Piety and Arcane were the only two he wasn't entirely sure about. Piety read: *Belief and thou shalt receive the blessings of God.*

Arcana was short: *The art of the master.*

Finn sighed as he closed his eyes slowly, losing his focus and making the whole thing disappear. If this was real, he could take control over his own life in a way that most people could only dream of. He could hone and grind his skills with more efficiency and accuracy, and he could then use his talent points to bring them to even greater heights. He could become a superhuman, perhaps. Superhuman strength, intelligence, agility. His head was spinning with all of the possibilities and information. And the alcohol he consumed earlier on the night didn't help either. He couldn't help but grin, though. It was all overwhelming and hazy now, but in the morning, he could take a serious look at it all. He could analyse it, document it, and start learning how it worked. The possibilities would be endless at first, but he trusted himself enough to be sure he would find an effective way of navigating them. And finding the best way to move through this system. A lot of it was still unknown, and while Finn hated things he did not know or understand, at the same time, these things were exciting and exhilarating. Nineteen points were left to spend, and with his academic year having just ended and an entire summer to waste on something, Finn knew precisely how he would be keeping himself busy.

Morning came rather quickly after Finn fell asleep, his alarm pulling him out of his sleep cruelly. The morning hurt, the hangover even more. But with an aspirin and a substantial breakfast, Finn was ready to face his day. He left to go on a hike to one of his favourite spots while Mark was still snoring. The hike took him about an hour and this early there was nobody there. Even throughout the day, there would be few people coming here. One of the reasons Finn liked the spot so much.

There was a big boulder here, partly dug into the ground over time. Moss and some small vines growing all around the base. The top worn from the many times it has been sat upon. Most of that would have been Finn, at least for the last few years. Finn crawled on top of it and sat snugly down, his legs folded over each other. He closed his eyes for a moment, enjoying it. The boulder sat on a small rise in the ground that was at a sharp curve of a nearby meandering creek. In fall and spring, this would be almost overflowing, but now it was barely a gentle stream. Still the soft slushing sounds it made calmed Finn. With his hands resting on his knees, he would now look like a person meditating to any passer-by. But what he really was doing was opening the system. Closing it and then opening it again. Slow. Fast. Trying to see how it worked, if it made any differences and to just get used to it. The sensation was still new, and at times overwhelming.

After fiddling with that for a while, he turned his focus to his remaining skill points. He had no idea how to proceed. The change earlier had been amazing, and he could not choose what skills he would like to improve further and to what extent. The fact that he had no idea how hard or easy it would be to 'earn' new skill points made it hard to judge their worth as well. On one hand, it was tempting to just put all his points into Strength, Health and Intelligence. But the popup had also said he now needed to earn new points. No more 'yearly talent point allowance'. And he simply did not know which skills would be of use the most to gain new skill points. Or to gain new experience.

Since last night he had earned a little bit of experience though. Was it from hiking here? Or the fight? The amount of experience he had gained was minimal though if he focussed on the bar long enough for the text to popup, it showed a mere 0.01%. If this was going to be the speed at which he gained experience, it would take him ages to earn new talent points.

After doubting and overthinking it all, and a long sigh, he started to invest the points. He pushed Strength, Agility, Health, Intelligence, and Wisdom up to eight. He then doubted for a moment but ended up spending the remaining 8 points on



Arcana. He had never really cared for religion, and he wouldn't start now either. Piety remained a one.

Finn didn't really expect anything to happen, but to his surprise, several things happened at once.

First, a new line appeared at the bottom of his vision. A blue line that, when focussed upon, showed him his mana points. It stood at thirty now. After that, he got three new popups as well. The first one was short and straightforward.

*Information about the Arcane arts is now added to the Wiki!*

When it mentioned the Wiki Finn cursed himself for not checking that first, it would probably have helped him a lot in deciding in which skills to invest. But the next popup came to pull his focus.

*Arcane apprentice rank reached. Your skill tree developed new Arcane skills! You unlocked your first Arcane skill! Basic elemental surge, please pick your element now.*

At the bottom of the popup where four squares, each had an image in them. The images were clear icons for Earth, Water, Fire and Air. The basic elements, Finn had a chuckle. Without much thought, Finn chose Fire. He had always been attracted to fire, toying with it since he was a kid. The other squares disappeared, and the Fire square enlarged and then slid down. Next to the plus icon at the bottom, a new icon appeared, representing an open book with a star above it. From the book, a small column rose up, into which the Fire icon slid, and then the column rose down again. Finn wanted to inspect what just happened and see what it could do, but the last popup showed up before he could do so.

*You have set your first gentle steps into the Arcane arts and have earned your very first spell! With this, you have earned your first levels in Arcane Grammerie and Mind Cultivation. Both these skills are essential to training for the Arcane arts. You should take care in learning more about both of these. As with all skills, using them will also increase their level!*

Finn frowned as the message disappeared and he realised what it was saying. *As with all skills using this will increase its level.*

Did that mean that each skill had a level of their own, with an experience bar of their own? All separate from his main experience bar? And now that he thought about that was there such a thing as his 'main' level? He quickly opened the interface and checked his 'player' icon. There was no level there. Just his name, portrait and talent point counter, which was at zero right now.

He moved to the skill screen and saw there was a new box underneath the Arcana skill. It simply said 'spells', and it had a small '1' in its upper-right corner.

Underneath Arcana, there were two other boxes, who looked exactly the same as the basic skills. These two read 'Arcane Grammerie' and 'Mind Cultivation'. When he focussed on either of those, he could see a small experience bar at the bottom of the skill. Both of them were still at zero. Curious, he then did the same on his basic skills, they showed experience bars as well. Most of them were at zero as well, aside from Strength, Agility and Health. Those were at 1.2, 3.5 and 0.8 % respectively.

"Odd," Finn said out loud, rubbing his chin. His skills had progressed but at different rates. This could mean that by hiking here, he had trained his Agility as well, meaning his endurance fell under Agility. His Strength and Health probably gained some experience from the fight last night. But it bothered him that neither his Intelligence or Wisdom had progressed at all. He liked to think of himself as somebody that uses their brain. Even when the college year had ended. He made a mental note to look into what exactly made his Intelligence and Wisdom gain experience.

Finn opened the skills box, and there he could see his newly acquired skill. Then he moved back and opened the new icon next to the plus sign, at the bottom right of his vision. This opened a screen where the new skill appeared as well. Finn assumed this was a specific list for his spells and only spell skills would be listed here. But for now, he had only one skill, and that was a spell.

He focussed on the basic elemental surge spell and a new box opened, filled with text. It described the effect of the spell, the elemental affinity (fire), and the cost in mana, which was two. There was some fluff text as well, describing the spell's aesthetics and a small button that read 'Show Grammerie'. Nowhere Finn could see damage numbers or estimates, which he found odd. He clicked on the button and a new screen popped up, showing a large image. First, it baffled Finn, and he couldn't make any sense of the image. Then, slowly, he started to realise that he was looking at a bunch of symbols and glyphs strung together in some sort of pattern. The random mess started to show a certain general pattern and a certain structure to it. Finn's understanding of the image gradually increased, and ideas, theories and abstract understandings about the image started to pop up in his head. Almost seemingly on their own. When he noticed this, Finn assumed this was what the Arcane Grammerie skill was for, helping him make sense of things like this. Finn gasped when he realised he had enough 'understanding' of the image to be able to read the glyphs. He could discern parts in the whole, and he knew the



entire image was the 'spell circle' of the spell. Or at least what made the spell a spell.

He also realised that he theoretically could make new spells this way. Sure, he would need more knowledge about the patterns, the glyphs, and how they interacted with each other. But he would be able to use individual glyphs, put them together in another configuration and create a new spell. If it worked, it meant Finn could create custom spells and that he would not be dependent on his Arcane skill to gain new spells as well.

Finn got up and stretched his body, inhaling the fresh morning air. His head was bouncing with emotions and newfound knowledge. It was almost too much to handle. He jumped off the boulder, and he noticed this had become considerably more easy than before, and walked in circles for a bit. Thinking. He needed to test if all of this was real. If his assumptions were correct. He had to make sure everything worked the way he thought it did. Otherwise, none of his plans would work out as he planned them, even have opposite effects of what he planned for. He focussed and pulled up the spell again. There was no 'fire' or 'trigger' button on it, no clear way of firing or using the spell. He kept looking but as far as he could see there was no way to actually use the damned thing. And just as he was getting so frustrated he wanted to stop looking, he noticed the fog around his hands. It gently curled around them as it changed its colour, always some soft pastel hue. Intrigued, he turned his hands, looking at the fog. As he focused on the fog, he suddenly felt, on instinct, how he could charge it with his mana. Without a second thought, he started to charge it, and the fog started to get more vibrant in colour. The pastels making way to more bright and flashy colours, of the same hue's. The fog started to swirl faster around his hands, more erratic and wild as well. Finn moved his hand closer to his face so he could study the fog better. As he did, he could *feel* the power that resided in the fog, the mana that he just had charged it with. He looked at his mana bar and saw that two points were subtracted from it. He tried to push more mana in the fog but felt pushback and decided not to force it. He moved his hand again, waving it side to side and watched the fog trail behind it. It would make a short trail of a few centimetres, but the fog would always stay close to his hand. Dissipating when too far away. He aimed the palm of his hand to a tree stump that sat nearby. The tree had broken under its own weight, perhaps in a summer storm and the stump looked fresh. A few days old or so. Again he was not really sure what he needed to do but his instincts, or the system, kicked in

again. Knowledge he didn't have before arose in his head and showed him how to trigger the spell. It felt strange and unfamiliar, like when he opened the interface for the first time. As soon as he did, the fog lit up, as if it was a small cloud with lightning inside of it, thundering in a violent storm. It flashed around the insides of the fog and then it was gone, dissipating in an outwards wave. In its place, a burst of flames sprouted from the palm of his hand. Shooting out, crashing against the tree stump. The accuracy was a bit off, but that had to do more with how shaky Finn's hand was than the actual arc and trajectory of the gout of flames. The flames sputtered and lashed, but as soon as they had appeared, they disappeared as well. It all happened in a second or less. The stump was now scorched and burned, small cinders still burning here and there, quickly dying out, leaving thin pillars of smoke.

"Holy shit!" Finn exclaimed as he ran over to kick out the cinders, afraid of starting a fire in one of his favourite forests. His breathing was quick and shallow, his heart racing in his throat.

This was it. This was real magic. Real, pure, magic.

Finn couldn't help but giggle in his joy. Smiling and grinning as he gasped. He looked at his hands and started to toy with the spell. Study it. Summoning the fog, then trying to let it go. Charging it and then letting it go. This worked, but he only got half his mana back. Something to keep in mind. He was learning, eager and hasty. His thirst for more was unquenchable as this was by far one of the most exciting things he had ever come across in his life.

The day flew by as he experimented with the spell and then trained it. In the matter of an hour, he had burned through all of his mana. He learned that the rate at which his mana replenished was abysmal, a mere four points an hour. Giving him two new chances to use the spell an hour. It was better than nothing of course, and Finn spent the remaining time sifting through the Wiki.

Most of the content was useless, it stated things he knew already or that he would know in the first few seconds of seeing it. The popup did say the information would be minimal, but this was a joke. It didn't help Finn at all. Bored, he started to do exercises, to train his physique while waiting for the mana to be replenished. When the sun started to set already, he suddenly remembered the Mind Cultivation skill. Swearing that he forgot about it, he grabbed his things and started to hike back home. He'd rather be home before dark as he neglected to bring a torch with him, and these woods were dense. At night he wouldn't be able to see a thing.

Once home, he would check the Cultivation skill first, or perhaps eat. His body was starting to protest after a full day without food. As he walked home, he looked up, watching the stars appear in the sky one by one, thinking about his life. About his future. About everything that was happening. And he couldn't help but wonder if there was a God; after all something had created this system. And without him knowing, Finn raised his Piety with a single zero point zero one percent.