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## **Roll for Initiative: A Player's Guide to Tabletop Role-Playing Games in Libraries**

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Roll for Initiative: A Player's Guide to Tabletop Role-Playing Games in Libraries

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## INTRODUCTION

- GM:* You see a creepy subterranean creature hanging onto the side of a pillar. It is peering at you with one large, green eye. What do you do?
- Ranger:* I'm going to drink this invisibility potion and cross this bridge to get a closer look. I'm also going to nock an arrow and hold my attack in case it notices me.
- Cleric:* One large green eye. Where have I seen this before? Wait, I think that's a Nothic.
- Bard:* Can I try talking to it?
- GM:* Sure, make a persuasion check.
- Bard:* I rolled a 7, plus my modifier is a 3, so a 10. What does that do?
- GM:* The Nothic notices you and you can feel its gaze penetrating your soul. Nothing happens.
- Fighter:* I'm going to aim and fire my pistol at the creature. I'm aiming right for that big, green eye.
- GM:* Alright everyone, roll for initiative.

### What are Role-Playing Games?

Scenes like this from one of my earlier campaigns are played by role-playing game (RPG) enthusiasts around the world. RPGs come in all shapes and sizes and are broken out into roughly four categories. Live action role-play (LARP) involves players physically acting out their characters in fantasy simulations (Daniau, 2016). Play-by-post RPG (PRPG) is unique as it is played entirely through textual means (e.g., through email, online chats, forums) (2016). Video RPGs (VRPG) are extremely common and involve the exploration of virtual worlds and can be played solo on a video game console or computer, or with millions of other players through massively multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPG). Pen-and-paper RPGs, or tabletop RPGs (TTRPGs), are social games where players assume the roles of characters, such as clerics, paladins, or wizards in fantasy or science fiction settings. These games are played with a small group of players who work collaboratively to overcome obstacles and resolve conflict. The Game Master (GM) fulfills the role of the narrator of the story and adjudicates the rules. You may have heard of a similar term – Dungeon Master (DM), which is specific to *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*. Players narrate their characters' actions and work together with the GM to craft an ongoing narrative that continually shifts and evolves based on players' actions. TTRPGs fill a special place in libraries and education as they are effective at providing rich and safe environments for learning and developing a variety of social and technical skills (Snow, 2008). RPG programs within the library setting also foster greater community involvement with the library and its services, as well as attracts new library users (Hill, 2016). This paper will discuss the history and player benefits of TTRPGs. I will also focus on collecting TTRPG material and developing programming in libraries.

### A Brief History of the Tabletop Role-Playing Game

*D&D* may be the first title that pops into your head when you think of RPGs; not only is it the most popular and best-selling TTRPG, *D&D* is also the first. In 1974, Gary Gygax and David Arneson of Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) created the first edition of *D&D* using elements from *Chainmail* and *Blackmoor*. The rules for the game were derived from a tabletop war game developed by Gygax called *Chainmail*, and player mechanics were borrowed from Arneson's *Blackmoor*. Interestingly, *Blackmoor* is the game that first "introduced concepts of hit points, class levels, experience points, armor class and dungeons as adventure settings" (Snow, 2008, p. 63) that are common in today's TTRPGs. Instead of commanding entire

armies on a miniature battlefield, creators Gygax and Arneson shifted the focus of *D&D* towards role-playing individual characters within a collaborative party.

After witnessing the success of *D&D*, other game publishers began releasing TTRPGs in other fantasy and science fiction settings. In 1977, two new editions of *D&D* were published: *Basic Dungeons & Dragons* and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D)*. *Basic D&D* worked to simplify the complicated rules of the original game and was marketed towards beginners, covering levels one to three. *AD&D* was created to expand and clean up the complicated rules of the first edition of *D&D*, and became the quintessential format for the popular TTRPG. Later in 1989, the second edition of *AD&D (AD&D 2e)* was released which condensed numerous volumes of rules into three “core” books: the *Player's Handbook*, *Monstrous Compendium* (later renamed the *Monster Manual*), and the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. This would become the standard format for later *D&D* games, as well as the games of TSR's competitors.

To compete with *D&D*, other game publishers noticed the impact of *D&D* and released their own titles set in similar medieval fantasy worlds. *Chivalry and Sorcery*, one of *D&D*'s earliest competitors, was published in 1977 by Fantasy Games Unlimited. In 1978, Chaosium decided to jump into the fray and published *Runequest*. In the 1980s, four major games were published to compete, including Chaosium's *King Arthur Pendragon*, British Games Workshops' *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, Bard Games' *Talisanta*, and Lion Rampant Games' *Ars Magica*. In the early 1990s, a major competitor began publishing RPGs that greatly emphasized the role-playing aspect, this publisher was White Wolf. Arguably, White Wolf's most popular title is *Vampire: The Masquerade*.

However, even after the success of *D&D*, TSR was experiencing financial trouble, and in 1997, was purchased by Seattle-based games publisher, Wizards of the Coast (WotC). Perhaps better known for the trading card game *Magic: The Gathering*, WotC made *D&D* popular again by rewriting and releasing a third edition of the TTRPG (*D&D 3e*). Along with gaining control of TSR, WotC also developed the Open Game License (OGL) which “allowed creators besides WotC to use the mechanics designated ‘open game content’... to create their own games and sell them” (Snow, 2008, p. 65). With the advent of the internet, crowdfunding campaigns, print on demand, and WotC's OGL, the market for RPGs has become vast (Torres-Roman & Snow, 2014). As of spring 2018, the North American hobby games market has grown to \$1.55 billion, of which role-playing games make up \$55 million, and is steadily increasing (En World, 2018).

## THE BENEFITS OF ROLE-PLAYING GAMES ON PLAYERS

The literature suggests that TTRPGs are a great tool for improving social and technical skills, as well as creating inclusive, collaborative environments for players to learn. TTRPGs can help cultivate a laundry list of important life skills, including inventiveness, reading comprehension, socialization, problem-solving, and empathy skills, to name a few. The major attractors to TTRPGs for most players are social and open-world aspects (Sich, 2012) in which players are often given the option to discover and pursue their choice of quests and side-quests.

### Social Skills

Hutton (2017) writes that TTRPGs are highly regarded as an outlet for creativity. For example, many players exercise their creativity when developing in-depth backstories for their characters, and GMs can create their own homebrew adventures complete with unique populations, locations, lore, and maps. Hutton (2017) also writes that TTRPGs are useful for developing reading comprehension and critical thinking skills since gameplay is focused on listening to and visualizing what the GM is narrating, paying attention to how characters react to situations, and developing clever strategies to overcome obstacles. Merilainen (n.d.) conducted a quantitative study to learn about various aspects of role-playing as a hobby and found that TTRPGs played an important role in developing new social skills. Nearly all respondents reported that TTRPGs had provided some significant social experiences, often resulting in positive effects on their interpersonal relationships. Respondents reported that they developed new friendships through playing RPGs and that their social circles grew considerably (n.d.). Additionally, players often improved their improvisational, language, and problem solving skills (n.d.). Merilainen (n.d.) also writes that the “more the players reported playing characters differing from themselves, the more they reported a feeling of having developed their empathy skills” (p. 59). TTRPGs not only became important facets of players’ personalities, but they also reportedly increased players’ self-awareness and promoted positive mental development (n.d.).

### Technical Skills

Darvasi, Torres-Roman and Snow write about the technical skills learned from playing TTRPGs. The main skills gained from TTRPGs, according to Darvasi (2018), include: research, decision making, calculations, negotiation, and spatial visualization. Playing TTRPGs is an “innately multidisciplinary and multimodal experience” as players develop knowledge about geography from studying game maps, make quick mental math calculations from rolling dice and adding or subtracting modifiers, and demonstrate logic from decision making (Darvasi, 2018). In one example, a teacher used a modified version of *D&D* with a third grade class which combined the subjects of math, reading, writing, and social studies. The teacher found that the game environment motivated students to learn the material. Students who were not strong in math previously found themselves becoming stronger from playing *D&D* and were able to apply their new knowledge to the math that was taught in class (Darvasi, 2018). Further, the students showed not only great academic, but also behavioural, success as a result of the program (Darvasi, 2018).

In Torres-Roman and Snow’s (2014) research, they found that players gained resource management, spatial, and socialization skills. Since much of what happens in TTRPGs is verbal, players develop the ability to visualize what is happening in the narrative (2014). Some players utilize miniature figures of characters, enemies, and objects, as well as maps, either printed, projected, or drawn out on a grid to further visualize the scene. As a result of this visualization, players learn how to convert map space

(usually squares or hexagons representing increments of five feet), such as line of sight, spell effects, and combat ranges, as well as develop tactics to overcome obstacles (2014). Furthermore, TTRPGs assist in developing both teamwork and leadership skills. Due to the cooperative nature of TTRPGs, “players must be aware of how their characters’ actions affect the other characters” (2014, p. 39) and must work cooperatively. Moreover, TTRPGs provide a fantastic outlet to practice leadership skills, such as mediating character conversations, taking the lead when negotiating with non-player characters (NPCs), or through planning strategies. Both sets of authors write about the importance of learning how to calculate probability as it relates to the player’s character. Dice are commonly used as randomizers in many TTRPGs to determine if actions succeed or fail. For example, *D&D* uses seven different values of dice depending on the action or weapon used, and include d4, d6, d8, d10, d% (used with a d10 for calculating percentages), d12, and d20. In *D&D*, the player will use the d20 for the majority of their rolls, including skill checks, saving throws, death saves, and determining whether an attack will hit a target or not. Due to the randomness of dice rolls, players tend to become interested in probability to enhance their character’s success (Torres-Roman & Snow, 2014). In doing so, players learn to leverage math to calculate probabilities of certain actions within the game (Darvasi, 2018).

### **Identifying with Player Characters**

One of the most engaging aspects of TTRPGs is the way in which players identify with and role-play their characters. In his paper, Blackstock (2016) examined this player-character relationship through a series of phenomenological interviews with *Vampire: The Masquerade* players. Blackstock (2016) discovered four common themes: continuum of personalization, stream of embodiment, freedom, and character as teacher. Before being able to fully play in-character, players generally require an “unspecified number of sessions” (2016) to learn about their characters, including their desires and motivations. TTRPGs not only “recapture the imaginative collaborative storytelling that naturally occurs in youth” (2016), they also have a liberating effect on many players. Through TTRPGs, players are able to become any character with few limitations. Sure, many TTRPGs stipulate rules around class and race systems, but players are encouraged to create their own unique combinations. Moreover, most TTRPGs allow characters to gain experience points to increase levels and further character customization often occurs when a character levels up. Players are also encouraged to design characters with the purpose of exploring concepts of morality or experience certain cultural or social issues, such as class systems or racism. Some classes within TTRPGs have these elements built in. For example, rangers in *D&D 5e* have racism built into the class. At level one, players select a “favoured enemy” which they gain advantage (meaning they can roll two d20s and select the highest roll) on tracking the selected enemy. By creating characters that explore morality or social and cultural issues, “players can experience personal, interpersonal, and social facets that they otherwise might never experience” (2016). Players may also consciously or subconsciously create a character that closely mirrors aspects of the player (2016). In doing so, characters may be used as a means to gain insight into the player’s life and motivations (2016). These insights are usually gained through experiencing how player characters overcome challenges and pitfalls within the game.

TTRPGs possess many opportunities for learning and growth for players of all ages, which is why libraries are the ideal institutions to collect and design programming to further engage with these materials.

## COLLECTING TTRPGS IN LIBRARIES

### Why Collect TTRPG Materials?

The addition of TTRPGs in libraries is effective for creating inclusive and collaborative environments, which is conducive for developing useful skills. By carrying these materials, players are encouraged to use the existing library collection. For example, many TTRPGs are deeply rooted in mythology and world cultures, usually ancient or medieval, which encourages players to use the collection to learn more about the materials that inspired their favourite games (Snow, 2008). In fact, Snow (2008) suggests that TTRPGs “could be used to highlight or enhance specific aspects of the library’s collection” (p. 67), such as graphic novels, fantasy novels, or materials about world mythology. Libraries should also consider including TTRPG materials in circulating collections for those who are unable to purchase their own. Not all TTRPGs are expensive and libraries possess the creative liberty of selecting lesser known (and inexpensive) TTRPGs to develop strong collection and programming initiatives.

### Collection Statistics

Even though TTRPGs are beneficial to both players and libraries, very few libraries carry TTRPG materials. In their research, Schneider and Hutchison (2015) calculate that roughly nine out of ten libraries do not carry TTRPG materials in their circulating collection. Out of all the titles they ran through the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) system, the authors discovered that *D&D* was the most dominant title in many collections. Upon further analysis, the authors found that 43.6 percent of the titles were published by WotC/TSR and the remaining 56.3 percent of titles were published by 27 different publishers (2015). One must wonder why libraries may not carry TTRPG materials in their circulating collections. Several sources indicate that the reason for excluding TTRPG materials from the collection is due to theft; however, Schneider and Hutchison (2015) suggest this may be a myth as they were unable to find substantive proof in order to prove or disprove this claim. On the other hand, Torres-Roman and Snow (2014) suggest that theft of TTRPG materials is a common occurrence for two reasons. First, people steal RPG books to add to their own collections, either because of the expense of purchasing their own materials is cost prohibitive or that some circulating materials belong to previous editions of game systems and are thus out-of-print (2014). Alternatively, some concerned patrons may remove materials from the collection in an effort to protect others, generally children and teens, from being “corrupted” by themes present in the material (2014).

### Collecting TTRPGs: Getting Started

Before collecting TTRPG materials, Torres-Roman and Snow (2014) strongly encourage librarians to ensure their libraries have the appropriate policies in place for collection development, materials selection, and handling of any challenges to library materials. Vose (2017) suggests that libraries often have to put forth very little investment when collecting TTRPG materials. Core rulebooks are the bare minimum required to create a TTRPG collection and may come in soft or hardcover editions; however, some print editions come in boxed sets complete with rule books and game pieces, such as cards, dice, and counters (Sich, 2012). Vose (2017) also recommends that libraries provide paper or blank character sheets, as well as d6 or polyhedral dice sets for patron use. Gameplay may be upgraded with the use of miniatures, maps, and dry-erase grid mats, though these tend to be more costly (2017). Librarians should also be aware that some TTRPGs may require additional rulebooks, settings, and adventures in order for the game to run properly (Torres-Roman & Snow, 2014). For instance, *D&D* may be played using only the *Player's*

*Handbook*, but if a library collection includes additional rulebooks, such as the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, gameplay becomes a richer experience. Sich (2012) also writes that additional "supplements and adventures may be helpful but optional" (p. 61). While many GMs create their own adventures, numerous game publishers provide pre-made adventures that are useful for offering "direction and structure to players and GMs new to a game" (Torres-Roman & Snow, 2014, p. 12). For example, when a new starter edition of *D&D* is released, WotC also includes an introductory adventure, such as "The Lost Mine of Phandelver" and "Dragon of Icespire Peak". These pre-made adventures generally come complete with a setting, maps, environment descriptions, NPCs, and appendices describing enemies.

Prior to purchasing TTRPG titles, librarians are encouraged to do their homework to ensure game titles are appropriate and will be used by the anticipated patrons (Torres-Roman & Snow, 2014). Local RPG groups make a great point of contact for librarians as they are able to provide information about the kinds of games that exist and are most commonly played, as well as provide first-hand reviews and ratings (Sich, 2012). These RPG groups may also become effective partners for promoting library TTRPG programs, as well as an effective recruitment tool to locate volunteers to referee games (2012). Email newsletters are a great way to stay recent about upcoming RPG games and news (2012). Librarians are encouraged to consult review sites, such as RPG Geek or RPG.net, to develop an understanding of different TTRPGs and their settings, play styles, requirements, and systems. Friendly Local Game Stores (FLGS) also make great resources for librarians. Similar to RPG groups, employees and FLGS owners are usually willing to answer any questions a librarian may have about any particular TTRPG, and are an ideal partner for promotion and volunteer recruitment. Not only are FLGS ideal for purchasing TTRPGs, they will often allow librarians to test out a game prior to purchase. Other places to purchase TTRPGs include directly from the publisher, bookstores, and online stores (Sich, 2012).

### **To PDF or Not to PDF?**

Sometimes collecting physical copies of TTRPG rulebooks is not always possible. This may be because previous editions of games are out of print or games from small publishers may only be available in PDF format (Torres-Roman & Snow, 2014). Librarians are faced with a dilemma: should they collect PDF copies of TTRPG materials and risk the grey area of copyright infringement or should they focus on collecting physical copies from big-name publishers? Several authors wrote about this very dilemma. Sich (2012) writes that librarians "should assume that purchasable RPG PDFs are licensed for single users, unless they can determine otherwise" (p. 61). Librarians, however, may make an exception to the rule and only allow the purchased PDF material to be used by the librarian running the library's TTRPG program (2012). Alternatively, Sich (2012) suggests seeking out PDF materials of free games, or purchasing print editions of TTRPG books. Torres-Roman and Snow (2014) recommend seeking free downloads of trial versions of TTRPGs. These versions are often called "quick-start" games and feature familiar systems with slimmed down rules and pre-generated characters: perfect for starting a TTRPG collection or program, as well as testing out new TTRPGs before investing in the full system. To illustrate, WotC offers a free PDF download called *D&D Basic Rules* for fifth edition; this is a scaled back version of the *Player's Handbook* that details the basics of the game, which is great for new library programs and for those who are new to *D&D*. Another great resource is DriveThruRPG, which is an online RPG store that sells watermarked PDFs and print-on-demand copies of many RPG games on the market. DriveThruRPG has a section of its website dedicated to free and pay-what-you-can games, as well as quick-start downloads of popular games. To supplement rulebooks and create a world rich in lore, game publishers will often make free adventures and



scenarios available for download, but the purchase of TTRPG materials, such as rulebooks, is often required.

### **Rules-Intensive & Rules-Light TTRPGs**

In the literature, most authors divide TTRPGs into two broad categories: rules-intensive and rules-light. Rules-intensive TTRPGs are generally more well-known and include popular titles such as *D&D* and *Pathfinder*. These games tend to be more expensive and often require more than one rulebook or supplement to play (Sich, 2012). Rules for these games are complex and numerous, resulting in larger rulebooks. The sheer number of rules contained within these tomes are nearly impossible for players and GMs to remember; instead, rulebooks are designed to be easy to refer to while playing the game (Snow, 2008). Snow (2009) also adds that this large number of complex rules often results in steep but rewarding learning curves for players and GMs alike. This steeper learning curve may be mitigated by a knowledgeable and patient GM (Sich, 2012). Rules-intensive games tend to prefer rules, statistics, and combat over storytelling and role-playing (Sich, 2012; Snow, 2009). Overall, these games may be better suited to players and library staff who have more experience with RPGs and have the time to dedicate to preparing gaming sessions (Sich, 2012).

Rules-light TTRPGs heavily emphasize storytelling and roleplaying elements of the genre over extensive lists of rules (Sich, 2012; Snow 2008; Snow, 2009). Not only are the rules simplified in rules-light games, the mechanics are also far less complex (Snow, 2009). In other words, these games “provide more opportunities for improvising and using one’s imagination” (Sich, 2012, p. 64) and are less heavy on numbers and statistics than their rules-intensive counterparts (Snow, 2009). Rules-light games make for a great addition to library collections as they emphasize group storytelling, cooperation, and trust among other players and the GM (Snow, 2008). These games also tend to be better suited to newer and younger players, as well as groups of varying sizes, while rules-intensive games are constrained to smaller group sizes (Sich, 2012). Many rules-light TTRPGs are widely accessible and generally inexpensive as fewer rulebooks and supplemental materials are required (Sich, 2012).

### **Collection Development Recommendations**

A couple of major considerations when creating TTRPG collections are what to buy and where to put them. Torres-Roman and Snow (2014) have three recommendations for creating a collections budget for TTRPG materials. For a small library serving up to five thousand patrons, the authors recommend a starting budget of \$200 (2014). In a medium-sized library of up to 150,000 patrons, they recommend a budget of \$1,000, and in a large library, the budget may be \$5,000 or more (2014). TTRPG materials lend themselves well to library collections. Torres-Roman and Snow (2014) recommend that librarians consider allocating a prominent spot for TTRPG materials. These materials should be visible to patrons and attract their attention (2014). To attract patron attention, librarians are encouraged to display materials so the cover art can entice patrons to pick up the material (2014). The location of the physical collection also requires consideration. Circulating TTRPG materials may be displayed in certain areas of the library where they will receive the most attention, such as near young adult and teen collections (2014). Non-circulating material, or material that contains small pieces, such as boxed sets, should be kept at the circulation desk to prevent theft or vandalism (2014). Torres-Roman and Snow (2014) also write that like graphic novels, TTRPG books may experience heavier circulation, and as a result, may have a shorter shelf life. This should

not deter librarians from collecting TTRPGs, however, as these materials are worth the initial investment and replacement if patrons are interested and frequently borrow them from the collection (2014).

When purchasing materials for TTRPG collections, librarians should collect games from a variety of different genres, such as fantasy, science-fiction, and horror. Additionally, generic TTRPG systems should be considered for their utility. Generic TTRPGs only provide the essential rules around character creation and game mechanics which can be applied to any setting. A major advantage of generic TTRPG systems is that they only require one set of rules to learn for all games and settings (2014). As mentioned earlier, free and quick-start PDFs are a great way to introduce a game to the collection. Free RPGs, in particular, are advantageous as they often ignore polyhedral dice sets and instead base their game mechanics on pools of d6 dice, which are inexpensive and easy to find (2014). Sich (2012) warns that when selecting TTRPGs with multiple editions, such as *D&D*, to be aware of compatibility issues between editions. Many game publishers will release new editions of a game to entice players to purchase the game system again. As a result, older editions soon become out-of-print and difficult to purchase, as well as incompatible with newer editions.

Other considerations for engaging patrons with TTRPG collections include creating read-a-like lists of book titles pertaining to TTRPGs and purchasing materials that are linked to popular culture and established fandoms. By collecting games that have been adapted to fit into popular fandom settings, TTRPG collections can further encourage interaction with these materials. Popular fandoms that also have their own TTRPG include: *Star Trek: The Role Playing Game*, *Star Wars: Edge of the Empire*, *Doctor Who: Adventures in Time and Space*, and *Firefly Role-Playing Game*.

Although very few libraries currently collect TTRPG materials, they are worth the investment as they provide a creative opportunity for librarians to attract and engage patrons with programming.

## TTRPG PROGRAMMING IN LIBRARIES

*“Libraries that focus on collecting only the most popular RPGs, or a large number of RPGs, may miss the point if they spend a comparably small amount of time on programming.”*

*(Sich, 2012, p. 64)*

So far, we have discussed the benefits of TTRPGs, including the social and technical skills that players develop, as well as several considerations for curating a collection. The best way to promote and engage with a library's collection of TTRPG materials is through programming. TTRPG programming provides many benefits to patrons and the library. First, Snow (2008) suggests that programming builds “social networks and circles of camaraderie” (p. 67) amongst patrons, especially if they are provided a safe space in which to do so. Second, TTRPG groups within libraries tend to appeal to “adolescent males, a population that is often difficult to bring into the library” (Hill, 2016, p. 38), as well as attracts individuals from diverse backgrounds (Hutton, 2017). Finally, librarians are encouraged to use TTRPG sessions to recommend fantasy and science fiction literature as a tool to promote use of the library's collection and literacy (Hutton, 2017).

### Starting a TTRPG Program

To start a TTRPG program, the only investment required is a rulebook, pencils, paper or blank character sheets, and d6 or polyhedral dice sets (Vose, 2017). Sich (2012) suggests that a “library may have a successful RPG program on the basis of one game” (p. 64). In other words, when designing TTRPG programs, librarians are encouraged to focus on one or two different game systems. As mentioned earlier, gameplay may be upgraded with miniatures, maps, and dry-erase grid mats (2017). If purchasing miniatures proves to be cost prohibitive, a creative librarian may incorporate the library's maker space in 3D printing custom character miniatures and game props for a well-rounded STEAM program. Another major consideration is the space in which the program will take place. Since these programs tend to be small (no more than six players), yet highly involved, a private room is ideal to contain noise levels and promote concentration (Hill, 2016). Vose (2017) suggests that librarians should plan to host TTRPG programs for at least two hours, but recommends three, as combat and exploration tend to be time consuming. TTRPG programming is not only limited to public libraries, the literature also provides suggestions for developing programming in school and academic libraries.

### The Adventuring Librarian

Several authors have suggested that librarians should take on the role of GM, or alternatively, outsource the role to an experienced volunteer. In some instances, librarians could provide youth who are interested in learning how to GM the opportunity to become the group's storyteller. Vose (2017) recommends that any campaigns played in library programs, particularly those geared towards teens or children, should be episodic – beginning and ending in a single session – in the event that players cannot attend every session. The downside to this, however, is that the GM may need to speed players through the session, resulting in players missing out on important role-playing moments and other key details (2017). Many TTRPGs, particularly basic or quick-start sets, come with pre-generated characters. Several authors have suggested that librarians should either use these pre-generated character sheets or customize their own for players to use since character creation can easily take up to an hour or more (2017). To provide some customization for their characters, players should be encouraged to create personality traits and details about

character backgrounds to role-play (2017). If characters are recurring, Vose (2017) warns that GMs should be prepared to take over, or hand off the character to another player, if the original player cannot attend a session.

Several authors have written about developing their own TTRPG programs in various library settings. As a teen librarian, Hutton (2017) experienced a slow start to his program with only three or four committed teens attending regularly. Over time, Hutton's group grew to roughly fifteen teens. Eventually, the TTRPG group needed to be split into two separate groups to accommodate for the increase in size. As a result of the program, Hutton (2017) has recorded several observations. First, he found that the teens who attended the TTRPG program regularly socialize with one another, even if they did not know one another previously. Next, he noticed that players who showed an interest in the game purchased their own dice sets and rulebooks, if they could afford to do so (2017). He also witnessed these teens reading the rulebooks in their free time while devising ideas for play and character creation. Finally, he found that the teens worked with each other in preparation of game sessions (2017).

### **Additional Considerations**

Library programming centered on TTRPGs provides a fantastic opportunity to encourage players to access areas of the library collection. For instance, librarian GMs may develop adventures that take place in fictional worlds or follow storylines of selected fantasy or science-fiction novels from the library collection. Works by J.R.R. Tolkien have been an inspiration for many early and modern TTRPGs and provide players with a direct link to titles in the collection, such as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Librarians may also make connections to literary classics such as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, and *Redwall* by Brian Jacques. Newer fantasy and science-fiction series, such as *The Expanse* by James S.A. Corey and *The Broken Earth* by N.K. Jemisin, provide rich environmental details of the worlds in which the stories takes place, and may lend themselves nicely to TTRPG programming.

Creating a TTRPG program does not require much investment: just a rulebook, pencils, paper or blank character sheets, and dice; however, the associated benefits are vast for libraries.

## ACCESSIBILITY & TTRPGs

TTRPGs are not only entertaining hobbies, they also make great tools for educational and library use; however, many TTRPGs are not accessible for players with disabilities.

### The Issue with Ableism

Several authors discuss inaccessibility within TTRPG rulebooks in WotC's *D&D* and White Wolf's *World of Darkness* games. Jones (2018) analyzed rulebooks for *D&D 5e* and found that *D&D* has come a long way in providing positive representations of race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic status. In the 1970s and 1980s, *D&D* rulebooks were commonly geared towards men, with women were rarely mentioned. The few women who were portrayed in rulebooks were overly sexualized and their roles were severely limited (Garcia, 2017). Women were featured more predominately in basic editions of *D&D*, which contained simplified rules and limited character creation and advancement options (2017, p. 239). Many editions of *D&D* also feature undertones of racism. For instance, a player's choice of race greatly affects their capacity to excel at various aspects of gameplay and may also limit who a character can become in-game (2017, p. 240). Additionally, character creation in *D&D* rulebooks provide problematic "preset attitudinal beliefs about other races" that "hint at bigotry and oppression within the game's history for different races" (2017, p. 241). Since *D&D 5e* was introduced in 2014, core rulebooks depict more positive representations of racialized and female characters and NPCs; however, positive representations of people with disabilities is still lagging and are highly stereotypical (Jones, 2018).

In Jones' (2018) analysis of *D&D* rulebooks, she found several instances of problematic portrayals of people with disabilities. First, many conditions, including blinded, deafened, charmed, paralyzed, poisoned, and prone, are treated as penalties to be cured, rather than accurately reflecting reality (2018). Instead, the game strongly suggests that "players are meant to play super-heroic characters, who are physically and mentally capable of defeating their enemies", further suggesting that "only the strongest deserve to survive" (2018). Next, she notes that the imagery used in the *Player's Handbook* often portrays stereotypical examples of disability. An example of this portrayal includes a clichéd image of an old man with a horn to his ear as he has been deafened, likely from old age. Jones (2018) points out that "this imagery reinforces the inherent ableism by suggesting these conditions are something to suffer from, and to be overcome or beat and that they are a burden limiting ordinary life". She also found that if players want to play characters that have a disability (or several), then "there are limited (if any) mechanics available to that player" to role-play creatively (2018).

In Henry's (2015) work, she compares and contrasts disability and accessibility within *Changeling: The Dreaming* and *Vampire: The Masquerade* from the *World of Darkness* setting. In both games, players can choose to use "flaws", which are related to disability. "Flaws" may include deafness, blindness, bad sight, and mental health conditions. Players may opt to select "flaws" in "exchange for points that can be redeemed for abilities they want" which are usually positive, and are "related to driving, extra health, or attractiveness" (2015). Another problematic aspect of the "flaw" system is the often outdated, colloquial, and restrictive language used within rulebooks (2015). Henry (2015) also analyzed *Apocalypse World* and found that it listed disabilities as "debilities", which are defined as "permanent flaws to your character when they have sustained large amounts of damage". *Apocalypse World* also does not allow players to play a character with a disability from the very beginning, which further regards disabilities as something bad that happens to a person, rather than "a regular part of the character's experience with the world" (2015).

If game publishers do not provide adequate positive portrayals of disabilities in their games, then players with disabilities will have a hard time seeing themselves reflected in the material. This becomes more problematic when disabilities are broken down into point systems, are reflected negatively, or stereotyped (2015). Both authors suggest that TTRPGs need to include “more positive portrayals of disabilities beyond stereotypes and mere narrative detail” (Jones, 2018).

### **Accessibility in TTRPG Materials**

Many TTRPGs promote ableism in their rulebooks, but how accessible are the formats of TTRPG materials? According to several authors, who are also visually impaired, the consensus is that very few materials are actually accessible. Wood (2019) writes that WotC does not typically release core rulebooks in a more accessible PDF format, but instead elects to produce physical copies. The *Basic Rules* may be the exception as it is available in PDF from WotC's website; however, there are still many barriers involved in reading this rulebook (2019). For instance, the rules are laid out in two columns with separate text boxes and images located throughout, which screen-reading software may not handle properly. Wood (2019) also notes that *D&D Beyond*, a web-based application produced by Fandom Games, provides hyperlinked digital rulebooks in HTML format; however, there is no way to have an offline or downloaded version of the rules. In a more recent article, Zambrano (2019) writes that the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped at the Library of Congress has made the *Player's Handbook* for *D&D 5e* fully navigable in audio format, and is currently converting the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Monster Manual*. This marks the first time the core rulebooks of *D&D* have been made available as functional audio formats for people with visual and physical disabilities (2019). Alternatively, several independent publishers have developed their own TTRPGs and adventures in accessible PDF formats. MacGuffin & Co. developed *Ghost Ship*, a micro-setting that can be used with any TTRPG rules system, which comes in both regular and accessible PDFs.

### **Accessibility Recommendations**

The majority of the literature regarding first-hand accounts of accessibility issues in TTRPGs are by people who are visually impaired. Several of these authors have written about their experiences playing TTRPGs, namely *D&D*. Kirsty (2018), a fully blind *D&D* player, found that accessing information about game rules and character creation online using screen-reading software was beneficial as she is unable to peruse the physical rulebooks. Many people with visual impairments use this very same approach, or learn the rules by playing the game. At a gaming convention, Wood (2011) played *D&D* with a fully blind man who memorized stats from his character sheet and asked for assistance when reading dice rolls. Wood (2011), who is legally blind, uses a character sheet with large print and a hand-held electronic magnifier. Kirsty (2018) developed a custom character sheet in Excel that she uses with a screen reader; the Excel character sheet allows her to keep track of her character's health points and spell slots, change items and figures in real time, and take notes. Libraries can accommodate players who are visually impaired by providing access to hand-held electronic magnifiers, large-print character sheets, and screen-reading software. In addition, libraries may use the Bits and Mortar website to access free digital PDF downloads of previously purchased physical copies of TTRPGs. These PDFs may be circulated to users with print and visual disabilities.

Most standard polyhedral dice are difficult to read for people with visual impairments, so Wood (2011) suggests using large, high contrast dice or a dice rolling application on a smartphone, tablet, or

computer. Several game websites geared towards accessibility sell 3D-printed braille dice. These websites occasionally provide stereolithography (.STL) files for players to 3D-print their own dice. Kirsty (2018) also mentions that the visual diagrams and maps that are often used in TTRPGs are very inaccessible for those with visual impairments, so she relies on other players and the GM for verbal descriptions of maps and combat. Not only are these extra descriptions great for visually impaired players, but also for sighted players, as these descriptions work to stimulate everyone's imaginations (2018). Kirsty (2018) also notes that having a miniature collection on-hand is useful in order to help players who are visually impaired to visualize characters, enemies, and NPCs. Libraries may be able to capitalize on these recommendations in their makerspaces by developing programs that teach players how to 3D-print their own dice and miniatures in order to further immerse themselves in the game.

Not every TTRPG is accessible for all players, but libraries are encouraged to adapt various elements of gameplay to ensure that library TTRPG collections and programming are enjoyable and accessible for all.

## CONCLUSION

Libraries are an obvious choice for collecting TTRPG materials. TTRPGs are not only fun and engaging for people of all ages, but they also provide players with a long list of useful benefits, particularly the development of social and technical skills. Moreover, skills learned from TTRPGs are easily transferable to the world beyond the tabletop. Additionally, TTRPG program development requires little initial investment beyond a selected TTRPG's core rulebook(s), pencils, paper, and role-playing dice (either d6 or a polyhedral dice set). TTRPG programs in libraries are particularly beneficial when librarians are able to provide linkages between in-game settings and lore to literature within the library collection. Not only does this encourage use of the library collection, but it also further promotes patron literacy.

This paper has outlined a series of recommendations pertaining to the collection of TTRPG materials, development of programming, and ensuring collections and programs are accessible for all patrons. In the next section, I have outlined several selected titles for initiating a TTRPG collection.



<b>SELECTED TITLES &amp; RECOMMENDATIONS</b>
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**Rules-Intensive TTRPGs**

Rules-intensive games are ideal for teen and adult TTRPG programs. Several games within this category include: *D&D 5e*, *Pathfinder RPG*, *Exalted*, *Reign*, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *Burning Wheel*, *Ars Magica*, *Heroquest*, and *Call of Cthulhu*. Many more titles exist and librarians are encouraged to read reviews and test quick-start rules.

Collection Recommendations***Dungeons & Dragons (5e)***

Publisher: Wizards of the Coast

Genre: fantasy

Dice: d4, d6, d8, d10, d%, d12, d20

Board & Book Pairings: *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* series by J.R.R. Tolkien; *The Dragonlance Chronicles Trilogy* by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman

It should be unsurprising that the latest edition of *D&D* shows up on this list. The fifth edition of the classic dungeon crawler is also one of the most streamlined and accessible editions in terms of rules and format. Libraries may purchase physical copies of rulebooks, primarily the *Player's Handbook* which retails at \$49.95 USD, as well as pre-made adventures; however, *D&D 5e* may be used with online applications that help manage character creation and adventures, such as *D&D Beyond* and *Roll20*. Sich (2012) advises against purchasing all three core rulebooks, adventures, and supplements due to cost. Instead, he suggests looking for used rulebooks or third party *D&D 5e* compatible publications to save money (2012). Several authors recommend purchasing the *Basic D&D* kit which comes with simplified rules, pre-made character sheets, polyhedral dice, and DM screen. WotC has released a new basic edition of *D&D* called the *Essentials Kit* which comes with a simplified rulebook, *Dragon of Icespire Peak* introductory adventure, a DM screen, six blank character sheets, eleven polyhedral dice, and 81 cards detailing magic, items, and sidekicks. Other than the low introductory price of \$24.99 USD, the *Essentials Kit* can handle parties consisting of one to five adventurers and contains a rules variant for solo adventures with sidekicks. These kits are quite a bit cheaper, but are often limited in their utility.

***Pathfinder RPG***

Publisher: Paizo

Genre: fantasy

Dice: d4, d6, d8, d10, d%, d12, d20

Board & Book Pairings: *The Name of the Wind* by Patrick Rothfuss; *The Wheel of Time Series* by Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson

Before WotC released *D&D 5e*, *Pathfinder RPG* consistently sat at the top of sales and popularity charts. Players enjoy *Pathfinder's* streamlined *D&D 3.5e*-derived rules, high fantasy setting, and in-depth character customization. Paizo regularly releases new content,

such as adventure paths, sourcebooks, and campaigns (RPG Geek, n.d.). *Pathfinder* is also compatible with *D&D 3.5e* materials. As a result, there are a large number of rules-supplements, settings, and adventures available. Libraries are encouraged to collect the *Pathfinder Core Rulebook*, which retails for \$49.99 USD and contains over five hundred pages of rules. Another great option to introduce *Pathfinder RPG* to library patrons and TTRPG programs is with the *Beginner Box*, which retails for \$34.99 USD. Much like the *Essentials Kit* for *D&D*, the *Beginner Box* is comprised of the *Hero's Handbook*, *Game Master's Guide*, and a *Transition Guide* in order to transition to the full version of the game. Due to the complexity of the *3.5e*-inspired rules, this is a game system for committed gamers.

### ***Call of Cthulhu***

Publisher: Chaosium

Genre: horror, investigation

Dice: d4, d6, d8, d20, d%/d100

Board & Book Pairings: *The Call of Cthulhu* by H.P. Lovecraft; *Providence* by Alan Moore; *The Black Cat*, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Pit and the Pendulum* by Edgar Allan Poe

*Call of Cthulhu* is based off the stories of horror legend H.P. Lovecraft and focuses heavily on investigation, storytelling, and roleplaying, rather than combat. This TTRPG is the first entry in the horror genre and is currently on its seventh edition. The mechanics are easy to learn as they are based off of Chaosium's *Basic Roleplaying* and use a simple percentile-based system. Since the game has been around for several decades, seemingly endless amounts of play content is available to expand upon the system. Librarians may purchase core rulebooks, such as the *Investigator Handbook* and the *Keeper Rulebook*, which are relatively inexpensive at \$22.95 and \$27.95 USD respectively. Alternatively, librarians may choose to purchase the *Starter Set* which includes a solo adventure to teach the game, a book of simplified rules, three introductory adventures, five pre-made character sheets, blank character sheets, a set of polyhedral dice, and handouts to use in-game. The *Starter Set* is a great introduction to the game at a very low price of \$24.99 USD.

### **Rules-Light TTRPGs**

Rules-light games tend to be great for introducing new players and youth to TTRPGs. Popular titles geared towards younger players include: *Faery's Tale Deluxe*, *Princes' Kingdom*, and *The Zorcerer of Zo*. Several other titles, such as: *Expedition*, *GURPS (Generic Universal RolePlaying System)*, *RuneQuest*, *Tunnels & Trolls*, and *Dungeon Crawl Classics: Role Playing Game* are ideal for teen and adult programming.

#### Collection Recommendations

***Expedition*** (<https://expeditiongame.com/>)

Genre: universal; potential for fantasy, horror, science fiction

Dice: d20

*Expedition* is a simplified TTRPG that works well for beginners, youth, and TTRPG veterans alike. The game is played using a deck of cards, a d20, and an application that is compatible on Android, iOS, and internet browsers. The application guides players through game mechanics, such as combat and provides a “choose your own adventure” text narrative. Campaigns can handle between one and six players, and are generally user-developed and vary in length. Unlike rules-intensive TTRPGs, combat is fast-paced and requires players to compare d20 rolls to their cards to determine success or failure. Through the application, the combat timer and difficulty can be adjusted to suit the needs of the group. The application also features a GM mode which allows inspiring GMs to narrate their own stories while the application runs combat. *Expedition* users are also encouraged to write and submit their own campaigns using The Expedition Quest Creator. Purchasing a hard copy of this title is very inexpensive at just \$24.99 USD, or players may print the game for free. Currently, there are two expansions available which add horror and science fiction elements to the core game.

### ***Basic Roleplaying***

Publisher: Chaosium

Genre: universal

Dice: d4, d6, d8, d10, d%, d12, d20

*Basic Roleplaying* is a gaming system that is several decades old. The system is purposely built without a setting so GMs are encouraged to adapt the rules to suit any genre. *Basic Roleplaying* operates on an easy-to-use percentile system and comes with modular sets of rules that can be used or altered to suit the preferences of gaming groups (Torres-Roman & Snow, 2014). Due to the age of the system, plenty of gaming content has been published which players and GMs can easily access. The softcover edition of *Basic Roleplaying* costs \$39.95 USD, or librarians may download a free PDF of the quick-start rules; alternatively, Chaosium also retails a hard-copy edition of the quick-start rules for \$11.95 USD.

### ***Princes' Kingdom***

Publisher: CRN Games

Genre: fantasy

Dice: d4, d6, d8

Board & Book Pairings: *Green Rider* by Kristen Britain; *The Princess Bride* by William Goldman; *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle; *Chronicles of Prydain* by Lloyd Alexander

*Princes' Kingdom* is a TTRPG geared towards younger gamers ranging from 5 to 12 years old. Players play as princes or princesses (or other gender-neutral titles) who survey the kingdom and solve problems for its citizens. This game is unique as players are encouraged to explore nonviolent resolutions to problems. Since *Princes' Kingdom* is meant to be played in shorter sessions, this game is ideal choice for children's TTRPG programs. A PDF copy of *Princes' Kingdom* can be purchased for \$9.99 USD.

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## SUGGESTED READINGS & RESOURCES

### Additional Reading

Ewalt, D. M. (2013). *Of dice and men: The story of Dungeons & Dragons and the people who play it*. New York: Scribner, a Division of Simon & Schuster.

*Ewalt's book is a fun read that details the creation and story of Dungeons & Dragons while touching upon the reasons people are drawn to TTRPGs.*

Torres-Roman, S. A., & Snow, C. E. (2014). *Dragons in the stacks: A teen librarian's guide to tabletop role-playing*. Santa Barbara, California: Libraries Unlimited.

*Torres-Roman and Snow's book is a great resource for librarians looking to collect TTRPGs for their libraries. Additionally, this title is useful as it provides a listing of TTRPGs, as well as an explanation of how these games are played and their complexity.*

### Online Resources

American Library Association (ALA): Games & Gaming Round Table  
(<http://www.ala.org/rt/gamert/role-playing-games>)

*This particular ALA round table provides library-specific resources for developing TTRPG collections and programs.*

Astral (<https://www.astraltabletop.com/>)

*Astral is a unique digital tool for playing TTRPGs both in-person and online. The service allows GMs to build maps, and for players to import their character sheets and set up virtual dice.*

Bits and Mortar (<http://www.bits-and-mortar.com>)

*Bits and Mortar provides free digital PDF downloads of affiliated TTRPG games upon proof of purchase for a hardcopy of the same material.*

DriveThruRPG (<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/>)

*DriveThruRPG is the largest RPG download store and carries a wide variety of popular, indie, free, and quick-start RPGs and expansions.*

MacGuffin and Company (<https://www.macguffinandcompany.com>)

*MacGuffin and Company is an independent TTRPG publisher that designs micro-settings for games in PDF and accessible PDF formats.*

Meeple Like Us (<https://meeplelikeus.co.uk>)

*Meeple Like Us is a website dedicated to testing tabletop games for accessibility, but focuses on board games over role-playing games. The website also contains an interesting section on building an accessible game library.*

Roll20 (<https://roll20.net/>)

*Roll20 provides a suite of digital tools for playing TTRPGs, including: D&D, Pathfinder, 13<sup>th</sup> Age, and more.*

RPG.net (<https://www.rpg.net/>)

*RPG.net contains a games-index and is great for reviews.*

RPGGeek (<https://rpggeek.com/>)

*RPGGeek publishes news and game reviews, and provides forums for player discussion.*

Impossible Journeys (<https://impossiblejourneys.com>)

*Impossible Journeys is a great resource for those new to TTRPGs and for those seeking indie and free quick-start downloads.*