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A Teen Librarian's Guide to Tabletop Role-Playing

Steven A. Torres-Roman and Cason E. Snow

Dragons in the Stacks

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Contents

Series Foreword

The idea of gaming as an essential library service has come a long way. Once thought of as only recreational and only for boys, we now know that playing games is beneficial and fun for all ages. It requires literacy, socialization, and strategy, just to name a few skills that can help teens in life. Many of you have successfully implemented video gaming programs in your libraries. But what else is there? Don't know the difference between an RPG and a GPS? No worries! Authors Steven A. Torres-Roman and Cason Snow have written this extremely valuable guide to help demystify the world of table-top role playing games. Their advice will help you understand the teen appeal of this type of gaming as well as show you it can be easily implemented in your library. They offer tips on aspects of library service, from selecting to collecting to cataloging to programming. The bibliography provides an excellent resource list for those new to this type of programming and to those who may be seasoned gamers.

We are proud of our association with Libraries Unlimited/ABC-CLIO, which continues to prove itself as the premier publisher of books to help library staff serve teens. This series has succeeded because our authors know the needs of those library employees who work with young adults. Without exception, they have written useful and practical handbooks for library staff.

We hope you find this book, as well as our entire series, to be informative, providing you with valuable ideas as you serve teens and that this work will further inspire you to do great things to make teens welcome in your library. If you have an idea for a title that could be added to our series, or would like to submit a book proposal, please email us at lu-books@lu.com. We'd love to hear from you.

Mary Anne Nichols
C. Allen Nichols
Series Editors

Introduction

Welcome and well met! Whether you're an old hand at tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) or this is the first you've ever heard of them, we thank you for taking the time to purchase and peruse this book. Presumably, you're a librarian looking for a creative and innovative activity to entertain and involve your patrons, but you might also be an interested gamer looking to start an RPG group and community through your local library. If so, then this is the book for you!

Let's begin by defining what tabletop RPGs are—if you're already well-versed in RPGs, then you might want to skip ahead.

Tabletop

The types of RPGs we deal with in this book are typically played at a tabletop, where all the players are physically present. Sometimes players will use virtual tabletops, like Roll20 (http://roll20.net), or software applications like Skype and Google Hangouts. Sometimes they'll also use maps as a play space, and miniatures to represent their characters, while other groups imagine and visualize everything in their heads. Either way, tables are handy as a place to put snacks and drinks.

That said, tabletop RPGs do not require players to dress and act completely in character, as if on stage, moving about and enacting, rather than simply describing, what their characters do. That's another form of RPG called Live Action Role-Playing, or LARPing—fun, but not the focus of this book.

This book also does not deal with computer role-playing games (CRPGs). While certainly a lot of fun, and usually visually stunning, they do not require as much creative input from the players, nor do they match the diversity of actions and options available in a tabletop RPG.

So, just to be clear, from now on, when we say RPG, we mean *tabletop* RPG (unless we say otherwise).

Role

Players in an RPG create characters that inhabit an imaginary world, and players take on the roles of these characters to interact with and imaginatively inhabit that setting. Unlike a role in a play, however, your actions are not scripted ahead of time; players must improvise their characters' dialogue and actions depending on what their characters encounter.

You may take the roles of heroes or scoundrels, warriors or wizards, aliens or superhumans with godlike powers. As part of the roles, your characters should be motivated to participate in the adventures that they undertake. They may be struggling to save a kingdom, or to save their own souls. They may seek to explore the unknown, an inherently dangerous profession, filled with pitfalls and perils aplenty. They may want to protect the innocent by defeating supervillains or slaying monsters. Perhaps your characters are daredevils and thrill-seekers that simply prefer a life of adventure to whatever passes for normal in their world, or maybe they're delving into ancient ruins in the hopes of discovering undreamt of wealth. Whatever the reason, when players take on the roles of characters, they should strive to act the way characters in that setting, and in that genre, should act. (Unless, of course, your particular group prefers a game where the players humorously undermine and subvert genre expectations. You might enjoy playing a schlub who happens to be an accountant, a disappointment to his family, and a vampire: Woody Allen as a creature of the night. Hey, it's your game.)

Playing

Sometimes the game master (GM) will decide on a particular game, set of rules, setting, and genre to use; at other times, the entire group may decide these details together. In play, the GM describes a setting and situations that the characters experience and must respond to, and takes the role of everything else in the setting beyond the player characters. While some games, even some RPGs, are solo affairs, the great majority of participants play with a group. The group of characters typically has a goal, be it well defined or nebulous, that it can achieve through collaboration and cooperation. This goal, like the types of characters you play, is often determined by the genre of game: you may be a team of secret agents out to foil a terrorist plot, a group of investigators determined to solve a murder, or a band of knights sent to recover a holy relic. The players may accomplish their goal, or they may be defeated—the outcome is never certain, after all, but they always win if they've entertainingly played their characters and contributed to the group's enjoyment.

Game

RPGs are essentially a structured and fun way to play make-believe. Each game has a set of rules, often called a system or engine, which structures the play experience and provides a means of resolving actions attempted in the game. RPGs usually use dice as randomizers to help determine whether characters succeed or fail.

Storytelling

Wait, what?! The word "storytelling" isn't part of RPGs!

Well, you're correct, it isn't. However, we would be remiss not to address the issue of story, narrative, and RPGs.

First, the hobby's origins lie with historical miniatures wargaming, with the game *Chainmail* being the direct inspiration for *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). These games were played on a tabletop using miniature soldiers and scale terrain pieces to show the positioning of the armies, and they used an abstracted rule set to resolve combat and command interactions. RPGs were also clearly and heavily influenced by stories from their very inception. Dave Arneson, one of the founders of RPGs along with E. Gary Gygax, modified his games with influences from *The Lord of the Rings* (Tresca 2011, 61). Indeed, fantasy literature influenced Gygax and Arneson to take the emphasis off larger units of miniatures to emphasize specific characters and their actions, and the first edition of the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Masters Guide* includes "Appendix N," which lists fantasy and science fiction novels that influenced *D&D*.

Second, RPGs often attempt to emulate the genres, plots, and action found in stories. To this end, many RPGs have rules that attempt to elicit the same feel of the stories they emulate; thus, games using the GUMSHOE system have specific rules to show off the expertise of investigators in crime shows, and *Feng Shui* mirrors action films by allowing players to create characters that are combat machines who can perform remarkable stunts. Many RPGs have rules that influence players, often using in-game rewards, to maintain a particular tone by playing their characters in a manner that aligns with a particular genre. For example, nobody in his or her right mind would walk down a flight of creaking stairs into a dark basement, with nothing but a faulty flashlight, to investigate those wet, tearing sounds. But, because teens do exactly that in slasher films all the time, a particular horror game might reward players for having their characters investigate trouble when sane persons would drive away at top speed while dialing 911 on their cell phones.

Third, whatever emphasis any particular RPG places on genre emulation or manipulating tone by means of rules, it's inevitable that particular storytelling genres influence the gamers playing. Simply put, people are surrounded by stories, whether those stories come from cultural traditions, myths, fairy tales, books, comics, films, or television shows. Most of those stories can be classified into genres, each of which has its own common structures, character archetypes, and tones. Players come to RPGs with this kind of "story information" preloaded and prelearned from simply living in a given society, and it influences both how they play and what they expect. Thus, most players come to RPGs with a sense of genres and narratives, and how they work: they expect knights to be noble, monsters to be evil, and serial killers to be vicious, intelligent, and cunning (and, thanks to characters like Hannibal Lector and Dexter Morgan, rather witty and urbane). Sometimes, a GM will want to violate expectations, for example, by making a particular princess neither weak nor helpless, like Merida in the Disney film *Brave*. Sometimes a monster might be the best friend the characters can have, because only the monster knows the way out of the ancient labyrinth. But regardless of how the action in the game progresses, the fact remains that players come to the table already knowing about and having various expectations of genre, plot, characters, and tone, and GMs and gaming groups will make extensive use of this knowledge when playing.

Finally, simply by having fun and playing the game, players will realize that once they've been adventuring and enjoying their game for a time, the game itself becomes a story after the fact. For example, imagine you watched a football game. There is no "story" imposed upon the game—it's two teams playing a game by certain rules. However, imagine further that later you tell your friend about the game, detailing the triumphs and tragedies, the fumbles and touchdowns that led to one team's victory over another. Whether you intend to or not, the very act of relating the game to a friend often means that you end up describing the game in a narrative form, as if it were a story, a phenomenon called *emergent narrative*.

In other words, even if the RPG rules don't overtly attempt to emulate narrative conventions, if your games are successful and the players are enjoying themselves, then the participants will remember the deadly perils, the noble sacrifices, the victorious triumphs, and even the inglorious defeats, and will retell these stories they've crafted for themselves to their friends. And in doing so, they might attract more players to RPGs.

The Golden Rule

Every endeavor or hobby has four kinds of people: those who have never heard of it, those who are peripheral to it (they might have friends who

play, but don't themselves), those who enjoy it, and those who are fanatical about it. Let's talk about that last group for a moment.

At their best, fans (short for fanatics, you know) can be excited, engaging, and eager to share their hobby with you. At their worst, however, they can be dogmatic and even bullying. The RPG community has a lot of people with a lot of strong opinions about their favorite kinds of games and their preferred styles of play. Forums and blogs abound with people engaging in communication ranging from friendly to hostile. Some people even develop entire philosophies of RPG play and design. In the midst of all of this signal and noise, we want you to remember the golden rule:

> If everyone in your group is having a good time, chances are you're doing it right.

There is no one "true" way to play. There is no single game that is inherently superior to all others. Opinions and preferences abound. If you come upon somebody who insists upon the inherent superiority of [fill in the blank here], you can take a deep breath and evaluate what to do next: engage that person in conversation, decline to comment, offer to buy that person a soft drink, or back away slowly. But you do not have to adhere to anyone else's definition of fun. If all of the players in your gaming group are happy, if they're enjoying themselves, if they're engaged and participating, then that's what matters. They may become fanatics, or they may simply stay involved. Sometimes, they might drift away—that's okay, because life can get busy, and not every hobby is for everyone, but at least they gave it a try! But if your players have a good time, they'll likely talk about the hobby and your group positively, which means more people will hear about the game, and more people might be willing to play.

Why Libraries?

Libraries occupy a unique position in our society. They are repositories of information, education, and entertainment. They also act as a community center, a safe and neutral space for studying, reading, exploring, and discovering.

Thus, libraries are a perfect spot for youth to congregate.

This position may not be clear to some people, but as more and more teens are willing to self-identify as geeks, libraries can be ground zero for the geek culture in your community. Libraries have a lot to offer, including books, movies, computers with Internet access, music, and, most important for our purposes, programming—much, if not all of it, free, already paid for by patrons' tax dollars.

The best thing about RPGs is that they fit perfectly into library spaces and budgets. If a library has a small conference room or other enclosed meeting space that can fit five to eight people, then you can run an RPG. For anywhere from free to $100 as an initial cost outlay, you can purchase all you need to run programming for *years*—a very important consideration, given shrinking budgets and financial constraints.

Beginning Your Quest: What This Book Is for and How to Use It

This book is intended as an aid to librarians interested in providing creative and innovative programming at their libraries using RPGs. To this end, we want to give you the tools you need to understand the hobby and explore its origins and boundaries. Basically, this book is the beginner's tour.

Chapter 1 covers a brief history of tabletop RPGs. We provide a quick and dirty grounding in the origins of the hobby that makes note of important names, landmark influential games, turning points in the hobby's direction, and the 800-pound gorillas that everyone's reacting to. You'll learn just enough to be dangerous.

Chapter 2 covers the whys and hows of selection and collection development—where to purchase the games and guidelines for choosing them.

Chapter 3 handles how best to classify and catalog the books and gaming materials you'll acquire.

Chapter 4 covers programming, including the essentials of what every good gaming group needs, and where to go from there. We'll discuss materials, choosing the right game for your group, advertising, planning, and yes, even how to give intelligent and measured responses to objections to the hobby.

Chapter 5 includes a collection of RPG reviews. Each entry within a list is structured in the same way:

- the title of the game
- the author of the game
- the publication information, including publisher and year
- the publisher's website (We list this information because publishers often make support material available at their websites, including errata, free adventures, quick-starts or introductions to the game, forums, etc.)
- genre tags (Many of these games belong to a particular genre or subgenre, while others are a mash-up of genres. If you know the

preferences of your players, then you can more easily pick a game that they might enjoy.)

- the type of dice the game uses (or other randomizer, if any)
- an introduction of the game
- a brief overview of the game's system
- the types of character roles that players might assume
- the game's setting, including information about the imaginary kingdom, land, world, galaxy, and/or universe where the game takes place
- a quick numerical evaluation of the game, on a scale of 1–5, based on the following criteria:
  - Complexity: how difficult is this game to learn and play? The lower the number, the quicker and easier it is to grasp and teach to new players.

    1 = You can effectively master the rules in one reading, though over time you may find additional novel and creative ways to use the rules.

    3 = You will need to spend some time learning the finer points of the game, and you may find yourself referencing the rules occasionally during games.

    5 = This rules set is substantially intricate and complex, and may require multiple readings and play experience to grasp completely.

  - Popularity: how popular is this game in the RPG community at large? The higher the number, the more likely you are to find people who already know of and play the game.

    1 = This game is relatively obscure.

    3 = This game enjoys mid-range popularity among tabletop RPG gamers.

    5 = This is one of the most popular tabletop RPGs on the market, so much so that even your non-gaming friends may have heard of it.

  - Support: how much support there is for the game, especially professionally published support. The higher the number, the more material currently exists to supplement the game. Please note that

this score isn't a judgment on the quality of the support material, nor is it a value judgment about the game—some games don't really need any support material, after all.

1 = This game has very little supporting material available.

3 = This game has decent support; the publisher continues to produce material for the game, and there may be considerable fan-produced material as well.

5 = You will have no difficulty finding additional adventures, supplements, and other materials to support your game.

- Completeness: how complete is the product you're buying? How much more "stuff" (see "Support," above) do you need to buy to make the game a satisfactory playing experience? The higher the number, the more complete the initial product.

  1 = This game requires, or at the very least significantly depends on, additional materials beyond the book and dice (or basic set). Those products may be maps, chits, cards, miniatures, counters, or additional books of monsters. The game may simply have a tendency toward power creep, where later published materials offer options to players that are far more powerful than those found in the initial rulebooks.

  3 = While this game can be played as-is just fine, players will likely own, and expect to be able to use, the support materials available.

  5 = This game is utterly complete as-is. Just add friends and imagination.

- Versatility: how many different kinds of games, campaigns, or uses can you put this game to? The higher the number, the more versatile the game. Again, this score isn't a value judgment—some games, for example, are designed to be more generic than others, and are able to handle a variety of genres and play styles, while others are intended to do just one genre or play style, and do it well.

  1 = This game has a setting and system that are intricately tied to each other, or the game wasn't designed to go beyond a particular genre, subgenre, or setting.

  3 = This game, while designed for a particular setting, has rules that can be extrapolated relatively easily beyond the given setting or genre with a bit of effort and creativity.

5 = This game was designed to handle a variety of genres and settings. GMs may need to adjust rules to properly handle the particulars of emulating a specific genre or world.

- Emulation: how well does this game emulate the genre or source material it is patterned after?

  1 = This game requires considerable effort on the part of the GM to capture the feel and flavor of a particular genre or setting.

  3 = This game does a good job of capturing the style and tone of its source material, or the rules set is easily adaptable and requires only moderate effort to emulate a given genre, subgenre, or intellectual property.

  5 = This game plays just like the stories or source material it is derived from.

- any final comments
- the cost of the game, in both print and PDF format if both are available (Costs are subject to change depending on where you purchase the items. Free PDFs can usually be downloaded from the publisher's website.)

To elaborate further, the guide itself is ultimately a small sampling of the vast array of RPGs available. We based our selections on a variety of criteria, including but not limited to:

- Is the game currently in print, and what is the most recent edition of the game? (These criteria are further complicated by the vast number of once out-of-print games that are now available again as PDFs.)
- Is the game current and popular?
- Is the game primarily geared toward adults due to mature themes and language? (We are, after all, gearing this book toward programming with teens.)
- Is the game iconic or important to the history of the hobby?
- Would we hand this game to a first-time GM?
- Did we represent a variety of genres, systems, and play styles?

Inevitably, we did not include some of what might be or might become your favorite RPGs—mea culpa. Just as inevitably, our selections are

somewhat idiosyncratic, and we likely break all of our above guidelines at one point or another.

But that just means you have a lot more to discover and explore! For information on games not found in this book, visit our Web site dragonsonthenet.blogspot.com.

P.S.: Before you dive into the rest of the book, we heartily recommend that you read the glossary in the next section. Usually, glossaries are saved until the end of a work, but we're placing it earlier in the book so that you can familiarize yourself with the terms we use throughout this volume.

Works Referenced

Tresca, Michael J. 2011. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.

Glossary of RPG Terms

Role-playing games (RPGs), like any other hobby, use a number of specialized terms and jargon. Rather than redefine and re-explain these terms in every game's description, we've decided to include this glossary in order to familiarize readers with these terms and to keep the bibliography entries more concise.

Abilities. *See* Attributes

Advantages and Disadvantages: Special abilities or difficulties the character might possess. Typically, advantages give the character a bonus at certain tasks in the game or allow the character to bend or break a particular rule, whereas disadvantages penalize the character. For example, a character might have "ambidextrous" as an advantage, or "coward" as a disadvantage.

Adventure: The earliest RPGs took place in fantasy worlds like those found in Tolkien's novels, and like Bilbo Baggins, the player characters often left behind hearth and home in search of adventure. Even though RPGs expanded into other genres, the term "adventure" stuck as a description of, essentially, where the player characters go, what they encounter, and what they do—the sum and substance of what occurs in RPG sessions. Adventures may last a single night of play, or may take many sessions to resolve.

Alignment: Alignment is a type of personality mechanic. Most commonly used in reference to *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) and its retroclones (though it also sees use in other games, like Chaosium's *Stormbringer*), alignment reflects both a character's behavior and general philosophical outlook. Alignment in *D&D* is mapped on two axes: the first ranges from Lawful to Neutral to Chaotic, and the second ranges from Good to Neutral to Evil. A Lawful Good character adheres to both the letter and spirit of the law, but also serves the forces of Good. An example of Lawful Evil (adherence to the law and serving an evil purpose) could exemplify a society like the Nazi regime, or

indeed Hell, as portrayed by C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters*, with its hierarchy of evil. *See also* Personality Mechanic

Archetype: Character archetypes are common types of characters found in a given game's setting. Often, these archetypes are essentially premade characters, requiring only a little customization before they're ready for use. Some RPGs include archetypes in order to allow gaming groups to begin play as quickly as possible and to emphasize the types of characters for which the game was designed.

Attributes: Attributes are those innate qualities that every character has, measuring things like strength, agility, awareness, intelligence, and charisma, ranked on a scale that varies from game to game. *See also* Traits

Bennies. *See* Metagame Currency

Boons. *See* Advantages and Disadvantages

Campaign: A term derived from the miniatures war-gaming roots of RPGs, a campaign is a series of adventures detailing the ongoing exploits of a group of player characters.

Character: The role assumed in an RPG. The character is at its root a collection of traits and numbers; it is the player's task to breathe life into the character and give it personality beyond the numbers.

Check: When a player rolls the dice to determine the success or failure of an action.

Chronicler. *See* Game Master

Class and Level: These terms are used to describe the general profession of a character (class) and the character's overall level of competence and power in the setting. Classes range from a set of rigidly defined abilities to more customizable templates where the player can select which abilities a character develops, leading to more variations within a given class.

Critical Success/Failure: Many RPGs designate certain results on the dice as critical successes or failures. When a player rolls a critical success or failure, the character's action results in the best or worst possible outcome, respectively.

Crunch: Often used in reference to a given rules set. The "crunchier" a system is, the more rules-intensive that system is likely to be, which is to say, more rules are used to achieve a given effect, style, tone, or emulation. *See also* Fluff

Dice: You know what these are, right? The six-sided dice you're likely familiar with come in a whole host of board games that you've played. RPGs, however, use dice with many different sides for a variety of purposes, and some games use dice specifically designed for that game. You can purchase sets of dice at your friendly local games store (FLGS), or over the Internet at a variety of online stores. *See also* dX

Dice Pool System: Many games have characters roll a number of dice rather than a single die to determine the success of characters' actions. The dice pool is often determined by the sum of different traits. Some games require the player to sum the results of all the dice and compare it to a target number. Other games, like *Shadowrun* or the White Wolf Publishing's *World of Darkness* games, identify a target number, and each die that rolls equal to or greater than that number contributes to a total number of successes. For example, in *Shadowrun*, players roll a number of d6s equal to the sum of the relevant attribute and skill; each die result of a 5 or 6 counts toward the character's success. *See also* dX; System; Traits

Diceless: "Diceless" is an adjective used to describe an RPG that uses a method other than rolling dice to resolve actions within the game. Often, diceless games use cards (such as a standard playing deck or a tarot deck) as an alternate randomizer. The *Amber Diceless Role-Playing Game* compares the characters' traits to decide outcomes. One horror RPG, *Dread*, uses a *Jenga*™ stack of blocks to build tension and resolve actions.

Difficulty Class (DC). *See* Target Number

Difficulty Number. *See* Target Number

Disadvantages. *See* Advantages and Disadvantages

Drama Points. *See* Metagame Currency

Dungeon Master (DM). *See* Game Master

dX: A type of die, with the X indicating how many sides the die has. For example, a d6 is the standard six-sided die you see in games like Monopoly and Yahtzee. Some games use a single type of die, while others use a variety of dice. Some of the most common die types used in RPGs are the d4, d6, d8, d10, d12, and d20. While some games use other kinds of randomizers, such as playing cards, and others eschew the use of randomizers altogether, most RPGs use dice to determine the success or failure of a character's actions. Multipliers of dice are typically written out with a number preceding the die type; thus, 2d8 means roll two eight-sided dice. Other modifications to a roll are often in the form of + or – a given amount; 2d8+2 means roll two eight-sided dice, sum the results, and add two to the total.