



RPG HANDBOOK GETTING STARTED

RPG Handbook ~ Getting Started
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INTRODUCTION

Roleplaying games (RPGs) have been around for approaching 50 years. During that time they've fueled the development of the entire videogame industry, played a key role in the use of gaming within businesses and become a part of countless training schemes.

It's not surprising that ideas based largely on tabletop RPGs have been so widely used, as these open-ended, imaginative games ask players to think for themselves and to improvise as they play.

This handbook sets out to provide a basic guide to what these games are about, to describe the benefits offered by such games and to suggest ways for new players to get started.

There is no correct or one true way to play RPGs, but it is possible to draw on the experience of many games designers, players or GMs aka Gamesmasters/ Referees to explore what works well for many groups.



PART 1: ROLEPLAYING GAMES

WHAT ARE TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING GAMES?

Roleplaying games (RPGs) are open-ended adventure games based on shared storytelling and imaginary adventures. Some videogames borrow features from tabletop RPGs - but open-ended, player-lead games usually involve playing tabletop RPGs.

There are RPGs for almost every genre or setting imaginable. For example, in a fantasy RPG an adventurer might be a powerful wizard or a hard-as-nails warrior. In a SciFi RPG a player's adventurer or player character (PC) could be a merchant, a space marine or a pilot.

PLAYING TABLETOP RPGS

1. Players take the part or role of an adventurer or player character (PC) and usually roll or create an adventurer. They might, for example, play the part of a spy, a starship officer or a survivor in a post-apocalyptic world.
2. Players then choose and describe their adventurers' actions during play.
3. One player often becomes the Gamesmaster (GM) or Referee, who designs adventures, describes what the adventurers see and interprets outcomes. That includes rolling dice for the non-player characters (NPCs) such as monsters or aliens.
4. Players' adventurers explore imaginary worlds, meeting many different situations in imaginary settings. For

example, medieval castles and dungeons or spaceships and unexplored planets.

5. Adventurers gain more skills and experience as they explore, allowing them to meet increasingly difficult challenges in return for greater prizes.
6. The challenges found in adventures can be about exploration, discovery, investigation, crisis management and combat - amongst other options.
7. Over time adventurers' imaginary lives become an interwoven part of the many events that make up their game-world or campaign.

THE BASICS

1. Select a system with straightforward rules and a genre or backdrop that appeals, e.g. fantasy, SciFi or Western.
2. If you are the GM you will usually find it much easier to sketch out the adventure first. You can either prepare your own adventures or start out using – and adapting - ready-made adventures.
3. Find some tokens or figures to help to place or locate your adventurers in the game. Extra tokens, chips or figures for the characters and creatures you encounter can also be helpful. Some groups may wish to use floor plans with measured grids; others may prefer to sit round the table and talk through the action.
4. Complete adventurer sheets displaying adventurers' skills, abilities and equipment.

5. Sit down around a table with some dice and start playing. The Internet has plenty of free RPG dice rollers if you don't have any gaming dice.
6. Try not to take the rules too seriously – it's a roleplaying game and the only way to 'win' is for the group to have fun.

DICE

The wide variety of dice used to settle outcomes in RPGs is all about varying the odds and outcomes to fit the circumstances. For example, twenty-sided dice/ D20s make bonuses for rolling a natural 20 occur fairly infrequently; while rolling a D4 for the injuries caused by a dagger fits with rolling a D8 for the injuries caused by a sword.

Common dice shapes include D4s, D6s, D8s, D10s, D12s and D20s. D100s are also fairly common, as an alternative to using two differently colored D10s to roll for percentages. These options are easily covered by cheap packs of plastic dice or free dice apps available for Android devices, iPhones and even Wordpress sites.

A minority of RPGs use uncommon dice such as a D30 or dice showing symbols from the game. These are not as likely to appear in free apps and are usually a bit of a gimmick.

The RPG Handbook's tables stick to the standard dice, e.g. 1-50 is shown as a D100.

ADVENTURERS AKA PLAYER CHARACTERS AKA PCS

Adventurer or character sheets are used to keep records of adventurers' skills and abilities. That includes skills, abilities and possessions made available when an adventurer starts out, as well as those gained during play.

It is usual for common features often shared by all adventurers/PCs to be grouped first. This is then followed by items and skills that are used frequently during play. Other specialist skills and possessions often come last. That said there is no need for a fixed arrangement and players can easily vary or decorate character sheets.

There are countless variations on character sheets out there and some games, e.g. Treasure, differ in offering options such as character visualization through images or icon sets. Across most of the variants the underlying spine of a character is generally a consistent blend of natural abilities, learned skills and current possessions. Character histories may also be added to some sheets.

STYLES OF PLAY

There are so many different styles of play and genres that it's quite hard to categorize RPGs consistently. Broadly speaking RPGs do tend to fall into groupings according to complexity. The complete length of a set of core rules can be a general guide to the likely level

of complexity, but this is not always the case as some contain lots more support aka fluff than others:

LITE

These are cut-down or very short RPGs, which are often quick to set-up, but short on support and lifespan. They may be promotional demos of larger systems or quick start gems like Risus. Another familiar approach is the ransom rule set, where a basic or level-limited game is offered in the hope that you will upgrade. These can be fun starter kits, but it's worth keeping an eye on how costs might add up.

RULES LIGHT

Rules light (to medium) RPGs are typically games based around easy-to-learn straightforward rule sets and a variable amount of supporting content or fluff, e.g. tips on running the game, lots of items and examples of play.

This kind of system may lack the tactical nuances of more elaborate systems. However, they often leave room within the rules to be filled by players' imaginations and usually support improvisational play. Rules light RPGs are, essentially, about offering open-ended gameplay and player choice. Traveler and Treasure are examples of RPGs with rules light mechanics allied to rules medium support.

STORYTELLING GAMES

Within storytelling games building shared stories takes precedence over the cut and thrust of resolving challenges mechanically - and players may be rewarded by the system for characterization and dramatic roleplaying. This approach encourages players to build

stories, but tends to induce the process instead of allowing it to arise, which can be frustrating for players looking for a more self-mediated improvisation.

GOLIATHS

A rule for everything tends to place simulation over a sense of authenticity, which is probably not helpful in encouraging new players to play RPGs and in helping players to stay in the moment. That said some massive, multi-volume Goliaths are so extensive that everything can't really join up. These arguably leave the same kind of gaps in the fabric of the game as found in rules light systems, but place them in a rich layer of overlapping rules and sub-systems that can support highly improvisational play through inducing house-ruling/ remixing.

OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR KIDS

The ways in which tabletop RPGs can open up opportunities for kids and learners is not going to be of immediate concern to many players – so please feel free to skip this section. That said anyone planning to run a group for kids or to use RPGs in education may find it helpful to have a short outline of the benefits likely to result from playing tabletop RPGs.

The following selection of RPG gameplay options or opportunities is not exhaustive but does sketch out some of the approaches to fun and learning accessible to kids, (and adult learners), through tabletop RPG gameplay:

FISH TANK GAMEPLAY

RPGs make ideal ‘fish tanks’, where players can try out a limited version of a full game. This allows players to learn the structure of the rules or guidelines using a simplified, and largely consequence free, approach to exploring the gameplay

SANDBOX GAMEPLAY

Sandbox games present players with realistic situations and set out to deliver open-ended gameplay, (where players are encouraged to shape their own challenges and make their own choices). Tabletop RPGs are well-suited to sandbox play, because many are designed to allow and encourage open-ended gameplay.

SELF-REGULATION

Unlike most boardgames, wargames and videogames, tabletop RPGs let players define their own roles and targets instead of setting a fixed finishing line or requiring a ‘win-mentality’. Some RPG players do adopt a win-mentality over gaining possessions or defeating enemies in combat. This is sometimes encouraged by games that reward player characters (PCs) largely for collecting loot and slaying opponents.

Fortunately, many RPG players, (and their groups), are much more interested in setting their own goals and prefer self-competition in terms of playing as well as they can. These goals are more likely to concern how players tackle novel situations and ‘in-game’ challenges than simply acquiring trinkets and power-ups.

IMPROVISATION

Improvising solutions to deal with difficult or complex situations isn’t an option within most videogames, as any options the

programmers leave out simply aren't available. Well-designed tabletop RPGs invite and foster improvisation, as players can interpret and, even adapt, the rules as players are devising solutions to dealing with difficult circumstances.

FLEXIBLE CHALLENGES

By leaving GMs and players to select their own goals RPGs make it easy to set flexible challenges, which can be quite demanding without ever having to be impossible to solve. In other words, if players are increasingly frustrated by a problem, the problem can be revised or set aside to allow play to progress. Equally, if play isn't challenging enough a GM can introduce a few *ad hoc* adjustments to make life a little harder for the players and/ or their characters.

SYSTEMIC THINKING

Gameplay and learning take place more effectively when players can see how skills and options combine to form a coherent system. Tabletop RPGs are usually intended to let players, and their PCs, progress and advance in a series of stages – allowing players to develop an understanding of how everything fits together.

MEANING

We tend to draw meaning from personal experiences rather than from shared definitions or scientific principles. The many varied situations encountered during RPG play may assist learning by allowing players to carry out a wide range of actions that contribute to their personal understanding of comparable experiences. For example, PCs might find themselves in charge of evacuating a city or in a rush to repair a sinking ship under very difficult circumstances.

PERSONALIZATION

Tabletop RPGs are able to open up opportunities to customize and personalize gameplay when making PCs, interpreting rule sets/ guidelines, designing adventures and constructing campaign settings. Consequently, players who may be used to having little or no input into how they play or learn can suddenly find themselves able to take part in deciding how they play and learn.

DESIGN GAMING

The most valued learning skills, (involved in developing the most elusive skills), allow learners/ players to become actively involved in shaping, adapting and re-designing a system/ gameplay. There are widely-used design games, (most obviously Lego), which allow players to set their own goals, design their own solutions and fine-tune gameplay.

Tabletop RPGs make especially good design games, because they're suited to co-design on several levels. Players start design gaming when they customize their PCs, but rapidly move on to co-designing solutions to encounters, roleplaying their characters and negotiating play with GMs and other players.

From there RPG players may also help to script narratives, interpret rules, form story arcs and define long-term goals. (Some RPGs even present options involving complete freedom to edit rule sets, encouragement to design gameplay props and ideas for introducing your own art or media into the gameplay).

Players who become GMs aim to cover all the same ground as players. They also interpret, design and patch the rules, try to promote player choice and, in many cases, construct settings and scenarios which set out to keep players thoroughly entertained for anything from an afternoon to a few decades.

FUN

Everything above is rendered largely worthless if players aren't enjoying the game they're playing. Getting involved in open-ended, improvisational storybuilding can be driven by either immediate or deep motivations. In either case, having fun remains central to staying motivated. If RPG gameplay heads off down a route towards grandstanding, win-mentality gameplay the fun is going to die, as that is not what genuine RPGs are designed to deliver.

ROLEPLAYING GAME FUN: KIDS

Kids are natural roleplayers and 'let's pretend' is central to early learning games and activities. It's not difficult to tap into their enthusiasm for imaginative play by offering access to a variety of imaginative media and by adapting RPGs to offer the kinds of entertainment that can keep kids interested. For example, while some kids may want nothing to do with rules-based RPGs well after the age of 7, others may well start to ask about adding a few rules to Lego Heroica or trying out a fantasy card game at an earlier stage.

Whatever the exact timing, these novice RPG players are likely to have clear preferences. Young players often prefer broad, (but limited), choices, with enough prompting to help them build up their roleplaying skills. Many may also make a surprisingly strong

‘investment’ in their player characters (PCs), which can be encouraged through giving PCs a backstory, a few personal traits and some player-determined goals. As a result, the golden rule with young kids and new players is to avoid killing their PCs or their pets. (There may be exceptions for new players as making it tougher to survive is often part of gritty play and injuries are lethal in some hard science or historical RPGs. In the case of a horror game like Cthulhu half the fun is seeing who can run fastest).

There are plenty of imaginative alternatives, including equipping players with extra protection, supplying convenient lucky-bags, using stunt point systems, (which can include a ‘miraculous escape’ option), giving players’ some ‘spider sense’ abilities and/ or selling a beaten, but live, PC into slavery. If a player has such options, (working alongside suitable prompts), and then chooses to ignore all ‘warnings’ in a way that gets the player’s PC killed – so be it.

MAGICAL CREATURES AND COMPANIONS

Young players tend to enjoy open-ended games where they can explore fairly standard fantasy and historical or TV tie-in settings. Discovery and novelty are usually valued over combat and solutions can often be negotiated by talking to monsters and working together to solve basic challenges or to escape danger.

Giving PCs some pets, rides or other companions to accompany them on their adventures adds a lot to play for many kids. Pets are particularly helpful, as players are often quite protective of them and they offer a useful way to prompt new players from within the game. (It can simply be taken as said that kids’ PCs can talk to pets,

rides and monsters without learning a language, but other types of communication, including sign languages and training, work well).

Overall, it's important to recognize that young kids, particularly those under 7, will have a very different understanding of many types of gameplay from older players. For example, a 3 or 4-year-old will rarely have an appreciation of good and bad that goes much beyond a distinction between the two.

Consequently, it's worth considering the messages and lessons young kids may take away from games. Avoiding overly scary monsters is a genuine concern while children are too young to make adult distinctions between fantasy and reality. Along similar lines, if kids are encouraged to solve problems with combat and to adopt a standard win-mentality, it's probably more likely they'll look to these kinds of play as they grow older and, possibly, carry such thinking over into other forms of real world problem-solving.

MAGICAL REWARDS

Tabletop RPGs differ from most other types of game by leaving the rules wide open to interpretation. However, if a game rewards slaying monsters and collecting gold above other options, (such as rewards for completing challenges or entertaining roleplaying), it's not uncommon for play to focus on collecting loot and seizing magic items or technologies that help with collecting loot.

Young players may well be unaware of the emphasis placed on combat by some RPG systems. This presents an opportunity to encourage player choice and challenge-focused play right at the start of youngsters' RPG gaming. Doing so involves issuing rewards

in the form of surprising or fantastic discoveries, bonuses for players' pets, new equipment for the local Dragonriders' school and, perhaps, the grateful thanks of those the players have saved.

Treasures and player advancement can be part of a wider approach, but young players with no goals other than killing the next monster will either get bored, or adapt to and join, the 'hack and slay' brigade.

LIVE ACTION

When playing with youngsters it's not unusual for a certain amount of live action or Live Action Roleplaying (LARP) to start up entirely spontaneously. Plastic figures are easily lifted from the table and brought into play, landscapes built from Lego don't take long to make and NERF darts are as good a way as any to battle with the Big, Bad Guy (BBG). Safety first please on the equipment if mock combat is part of the fun.

EXPLORATION

Young players are busy spending their time exploring novel situations and working out solutions to new problems in real life. It is, therefore, far from surprising to find that they usually enjoy a fair amount of novelty and exploration during gameplay. Fantastic locations, unrelenting villains, bold maps, mystical creatures and other staples which may seem too familiar to older players all work well with youngsters, because kids can often be quite happy spending half-an-hour talking with the first imaginary unicorn they've ever come across.

DISCOVERY

Uncovering a straightforward mystery, finding out how dragons are raised, learning how to mix a potion in a magic laboratory or traveling to an exotic land where the plants communicate are examples of discoveries likely to appeal to young players. Under such circumstances, working out how to make an antidote to a poison that's harming a friendly PC is usually going to be more meaningful and relevant than getting paid 500 gold pieces to kill a monster.

CARICATURES

As players get older standard issue PCs and NPCs lack the depth of character and character background required to sustain players' interest. However, for young players a world bristling with pirate captains, brawling fighters and grumpy old sorcerers makes for a welcome start. Apart from anything else, these caricatures tie-in with similar caricatures found in other media for children, allowing players to take cues from interacting through familiar roles.

MAKING PLAYER CHARACTERS

Experienced RPG players will start a game with a character sheet full of skills, abilities and equipment. The design of a new PC may even be quite a mechanical business involving combat optimization. Kids who don't know or care much about elaborate rules are unlikely to take much from this kind of PC design.

A group of young players is highly likely to be open to making much more of the character building process. Many can find hours of play in simply exploring their characters' background.

As soon as the parents have been killed off or side-lined, (which seems to be about establishing that a child's PC is independent and free of parental control), young players' PCs will often happily explore their local village, chase-off the school bullies, fix an invitation to wizards' school and/ or set up a home or base. Rules are barely necessary at this stage and the resulting 'adventure ready' PC already has a place in the game when it comes to setting out on further adventures.

TRICKS OR TRAPS

The types of subtle tricks and deadly traps set in the way of older, experienced players are, for the most part, fairly unwelcome in games aimed at young players. What appears to be fair play and/ or a tough encounter to an experienced player can easily be interpreted as an unfair bolt from the blue by a novice. GMs can get round this by clearly flagging what players should expect from a trick or trap - and by offering multiple solutions to the problems presented by tricks and traps.

POWERS

Powers, skills, abilities and technologies stand in direct opposition to authentic, gritty play if players' PCs are able to wield major or even unlimited powers on a regular basis. Youngsters can usually see the sense in retaining a challenge within a game, but they are likely to be looking to collect rewards involving a combination of frequent minor bonuses/ power-ups and some persistent - and genuinely useful - powers or skills. An occasional touch of the spectacular doesn't do any harm either.

The starting point here can be to make available magic items that give a modest regular bonus, which becomes much more effective when a 'critical hit' is rolled.

DESIGN GAMING AND GAMEPLAY DESIGN

Co-design and game-related play, such as making-up stories using plastic figures, creating models out of boxes, putting together game-related collages, gaming with Lego, drawing PC sketches and similar activities prime kids for imaginative games and sharing in the design of their own play and learning.

ROLEPLAYING GAME FUN: OLDER KIDS

For kids of 7-11 the wafer-thin plots and cardboard cut-out characters that once helped to keep RPG life simple soon start to look increasingly tired. Many such players are already likely to be watching TV shows like Merlin and Primeval, which offer moderately complex characters and plots. At the same time their play and games will be going through a process of social shaping at school, involving a shift from imaginative learning through play towards more structured and procedural activities. As a result, GMs and players who wish to keep kids of 7-13 playing, (or to recruit new players), appear to face a difficult task.

Tabletop games do, however, have a couple of aces up their sleeve. Firstly, a console or a DVD doesn't offer the same social fun as a light-hearted boardgame or RPG session. Secondly, whenever older GMs and other players step in to help to bridge young players' skills gaps, (through encouragement and prompting), the resulting

gameplay puts players back in charge of shaping their own gameplay.

The following options suggest a few approaches to adapting play to suit older kids. The style of play offered to older kids, (in terms of not taking the rules too seriously and offering challenges that prompt players to shape play), seems as likely to recruit more players as any number of electric plots or epic characters.

CHARACTERS

The trusty steed, the oily thief, the brash warrior and similar PC and NPC staples that often serve well when playing with younger players become ever more worn and clichéd as players get older. Players and GMs generally look to escape such basic PC and NPC stereotypes at a fairly early stage to lend their gameplay greater authenticity.

Rule sets may attempt to cover the whole of PC characterization in a single sweep during PC design/ generation. Unfortunately, this method can rely on characterization through exhaustive PC builds, character optimization and the straitjacket of myriad character classes. For a kid without an understanding of the subtle nuances of characterization resulting from rolling an extra 5% bonus in Truffle Detection this largely mechanical approach is a pretty soulless business.

Introducing simple mechanics that take account of a wider range of skill sets can help to breathe life into PCs and NPCs, as selecting personality traits, customizing PC's clothing and discovering, or

uncovering, some kind of past all go some way towards fleshing out a unique character.

Introducing backstories to character design is an even better way to build more compelling characters, because talking or playing through PC and NPC characterization allows players and GMs to shape characters as they're formed. The results are PCs or NPCs which have been self-negotiated to arrive at a good fit between a player's expectations and the types of gameplay that are going to occupy everyone at the table.

Once play has begun characterization can be firmed up and freshened up by keeping accounts of PCs' and NPCs' actions and deeds. Adding visual elements to PC records, keeping logs of adventure maps and diagrams, and recording brief details of PCs' adventures all help to put flesh on the bones.

Players continuously develop a PC's characterization though play, but NPCs don't receive the same attention and can appear static unless GMs form a pool of recurring NPCs who move with the times. For some, such as an old friend who never left the village the PCs grew up in, change may be infrequent and the occasional birth and marriage is enough to keep events in motion. However, for other familiar and favorite NPCs it may be worth keeping a basic timeline of events and updating it whenever players come into contact with the same NPC.

TRICKS AND TRAPS

Few players of any age seem to enjoy having deadly traps sprung on them. Older kids are open to adding extra risk to play, but not in

ways they consider unfair or completely unexpected. Traps should, ideally, be well signposted, have multiple solutions and only get lethal if players are disregarding the signposting.

Basic tricks can be introduced on a number of levels, including straightforward distractions, delays, bad deals and switching or concealing items. More elaborate tricks, such as pyramid schemes, are not something older kids are likely to be familiar with. In addition, young players may not recognize more complex ploys or schemes as a part of gameplay they are comfortable with until they're used to more basic tricks.

STORYMAKING

Rounded characters, campaign backdrops, (with geographies, histories and cultures), calendars of events, recurring enemies and plenty of events players can participate in, (e.g. an annual jousting tournament or a Griffin race), are among the elements a GM can layer, mix and weave together to form an immersive game that captures players' imaginations.

It may seem impossible to keep track of all the details thrown up by so many options, but there's no need to try. A GM can start play with a framework or blueprint and only drill-down into finer detail where and when the plots and challenges chosen by players call for further thought.

GMs may find it helpful to work from feature and event rich outlines that prime a setting with plenty of challenges and shared expectations. This approach makes it quicker and simpler to fill the

gaps when zooming in on the gameplay of most interest to your players.

IMMERSION

Older kids are interested in more immersive games with imaginative settings, but few are looking for this to go down the route of simulation gaming. Making play more authentic, more connected and generally grittier, therefore, has to avoid taking away the ‘magic dust’ or pure imagination offered by RPGs. For example, playing high fantasy with powerful wizards and mighty heroes works well with older kids, but complete flights of fantasy, (where the highly unlikely or inconsistent impacts on play), become increasingly unwelcome.

THE UNEXPECTED

A much wider range of encounter settings, plots and challenges, NPCs, tricks and monsters is needed to keep older kids entertained. Bolts from the blue may not be entirely welcome, but thrills and spills, the shock of the new, elements of mystery and investigation, minor conspiracies, a deeper or darker atmosphere, more territory and options to explore different habitats are all likely to be appreciated.

The more subtle the introduction and use of novel and unexpected elements, the greater the chances of them becoming a preferred option within a gaming group. For example, allowing players to research and develop a form of Greek Fire within a fantasy setting is probably going to work well enough, providing the cost of the ingredients balances alongside the destruction caused by the Greek

Fire. (It might also be helpful to limit the substance's use as a result of it being very hazardous to transport).

The alternative approach of simply suddenly introducing gunpowder, with all that follows, is less likely to seem novel and unlikely to add anything meaningful to a group's gameplay. Instead play risks being drawn into a technological arms race, which tears away at the expectations and challenges offered by mid to high fantasy.

DESIGN GAMING AND GAMEPLAY DESIGN

The design game options available to older kids include many suited to younger kids. However, there's a clear difference in terms of the variety of co-design activities that are both practical to run and also likely to appeal to players. Illustrating PC sheets, drawing detailed maps and building more complete models can progress to a new level with older kids. New activities might incorporate activities like painting gaming figures, planning and making a fantasy banquet, designing giant PC sheets or using markers to draw A3 dungeon layouts.

Starting out as a GM may also become an option for some kids aged 7 or over. Ideally, players who show an interest will get the chance to help out a GM at a few games, before putting together a small adventure and running a short game. Those who have the opportunity to develop in this way are likely to pick up a wide range of valuable gaming skills without becoming overwhelmed by the work involved.

ROLEPLAYING GAME FUN: YOUNG ADULTS

By the time a player is about to become a teenager some of the more magical or fantastic roleplaying enjoyed by younger RPG players has completely lost its appeal. So much so that such gameplay can be considered deeply embarrassing. As a result, there's a strong incentive for teenagers to move away from story-building gameplay towards supposedly more adult rules systems and/ or games mastery.

This drift towards win-mentality gameplay and wargaming can be tempered by making RPG gameplay genuinely more adult; which frequently involves offering increasingly authentic settings and plenty of realistic in-game challenges.

Adding greater authenticity is about adjusting the balance between the real and the imaginary – rather than getting bogged-down in simulation and re-enactment. Consequently, presenting teenage players with open-ended 'real world' challenges is a very straightforward way to set about introducing more authenticity without abandoning imaginative gameplay.

The options set out below can, hopefully, combine to help Gamesmasters to present campaigns and adventures that balance authentic, gritty RPG play alongside the slightly edgy imaginative story-building suited to the preferences of many young adults.

PERSONALITIES

Young adults are ready to move on from standalone characters to characters that operate within networks of relationships. Under these conditions a PC or a NPC might act quite differently when influenced by certain individuals, groups and/ or circumstances.

For example, a NPC might develop from the ever-amiable bard to the companionable bard who is completely hostile and unapproachable once a year. Along the same lines, an employee might behave quite differently when the boss isn't around, while a temperamental wizard could turn out to be unusually fond of apricot pastries – and very appreciative of someone who went to the trouble to find this out and bring a few round.

Group dynamics allow GMs to go a step further and introduced effects based on the behaviors of groups and communities. For example, the collective mindsets of crowds, fans, rioters, celebrants, zealots, families and organizations are more than capable of influencing, and dramatically shifting, the views and actions of individuals caught-up in group interactions.

TRICKS AND TRAPS

Mechanical traps and deadly traps are not of a lot more interest to young adults than other age groups. Tricks offer far more options and solutions to explore. That is not to say that traps serve no purpose, as finding a solution to an elaborate and dangerous trap can prove entertaining if players have to think on their feet. Nevertheless, most young adult players and groups are likely to be more intrigued by tricks, which offer a much wider range of challenges and plot hooks than most traps.

The combination of a trick and a trap also becomes an option with young adults. It is probably worth bearing in mind that even adult players need a gentle introduction to double-edged traps and trickery. Otherwise, they may feel the challenges they're facing aren't sufficiently 'upfront' or fair to give them a chance to come up with solutions.

CREEP

It's quite straightforward to make RPG sessions for teenagers a shade darker than games for kids without frightening or offending anyone. Hauntings, ill omens, dark prophecies, seemingly bizarre events, local superstitions, cries in the night, curious rituals and secret ceremonies are all able to lend play a touch of extra suspense. These kinds of events or interactions can also back-up any dark undercurrents waiting to be exposed within ongoing plots.

In contrast, within RPG sessions excessive violence and reveling in gore rapidly loses all impact. A threat to PCs only holds any real suspense while it's a veiled threat and the guiding principle with creep is that less is more.

For instance, a few drops of blood spattered over some leaves, a bloody hand print missing the impression of a ring finger and the discovery of a bloodstained dagger clearly brings more to the table than a gruesome description about a NPC losing a finger.

Appealing to as many of the players' and PCs' senses as possible is very helpful here and the options go far beyond the standard definition of five senses. Intuition, color, texture, physiology, (e.g.

tears, torn muscles and perspiration), personal likes and dislikes, emotional reactions, and formal and informal language may all combine and interact to create tension and play, or prey, upon players' imaginations.

For example, amidst the battle cries and lamentations of a desperate last stand, PCs and players might, respectively, have positive 'in-game' and 'out-game' reactions to the welcome sound of the marching song of a long overdue relief column.

In addition, when games may well involve all manner of wildlife, fantasy creatures and/ or alien species the sensory options get much wider. The electronic detection systems of a Hammerhead Shark may not be something we can easily relate to, but a PC experiencing a shark's senses while underwater might, for example, have access to radar-like images kept unavailable to those without sharks' senses.

Further options include some snakes' heat-seeking vision, dolphins' ultrasound capabilities, certain dungeon-dwellers' night vision and comparable sensory systems, which are in plentiful supply both in the natural world and inside most monster catalogues.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

At times a GM can really pile on the pressure when playing with older players. Crisis management is discussed in more detail when looking at challenges elsewhere in the RPG Handbook. However, the basic principles are straightforward and highly likely to help older players get caught up in RPG gameplay.

In the middle of dealing with difficult opponents, surprises, ambushes and/ or any number of other plot hooks and challenges, there's nothing like the sudden arrival of an all-consuming crisis to shake everything up.

A meteor strike, a massive earthquake, a volcanic eruption or any similar physical or political cataclysm can act as a trigger and players, and their PCs, are suddenly dealing with whatever was going on already amidst a major crisis. Under such circumstances players clearly have to adjust priorities, adapt to new conditions and remain mindful of the world as it was.

SURVIVAL

Survival gameplay is also discussed elsewhere in the RPG Handbook, but remains worth mentioning here because older players can become more motivated and more involved in play through the extra demands placed on players and PCs by survival scenarios. Adding a layer of survival gameplay to a game can add authenticity, encourage players to resolve to overcome the conditions, and present a series of dilemmas concerning who survives and how they continue to survive.

It's usually helpful to avoid using either crisis management or gameplay as a simple means to lay PCs low. So, rather than drop the players' favorite bank straight into a caldera full of lava and burying an entire city in ash, it might be more interesting to present players with the realization that they don't have much time to act if they wish to protect their wealth and their health.

Of course it can still be helpful to use catastrophes as a device to remove the unplayable, unpopular or simply played-out. For example, that much visited kingdom where the PCs are always hailed as heroes may become less hospitable after permanent flooding turns much of the formerly prosperous farmland into a massive swamp.

DESIGN GAMING AND GAMES DESIGN

Safety concerns, mess, costs and commitment can all limit the range of enterprise activities, spin-off hobbies, arts and crafts, gatherings and projects that are easily linked to playing RPGs with younger players. Teenagers still need safe, inexpensive and motivating games and activities, but the gloves are finally off when it comes to design gaming options.

By 11 or 12 many kids are able to begin to make their own games, scenarios, presentations, sketches and modest enterprises. RPGs provide an ideal backdrop for developing such activities and the motivation to sketch a PC or run a gaming group may be just the encouragement a RPG player needs to develop as a graphic designer or as a conference organizer.

RPGS FOR KIDS AND BIG KIDS

This is a selection of RPGs aimed at kids and young people. It's not at all clear if a rule set adds much to roleplaying for younger kids, as they tend to need little more than a few plastic figures and their imaginations to get started. However, for some children a particular genre or style of play can do a lot to encourage an interest in story-building and RPGs.

The appeal of certain genres and styles of play also applies to older kids and young adults who are likely to enjoy learning a basic rule set or beginning to get the hang of a more complex rule set.

That said by 7+ there are many kids who could play perfectly well with a standard or mainstream RPG providing the GM shows a bit of flexibility. Consequently, the list is not intended to suggest that a RPG needs to be tagged as a 'Kids' RPG' to play well with kids. Instead, such games may be of value - to read or to play - simply in terms of helping adults to get inside kids' perspectives on RPG gameplay.

In addition, while genre and multimedia tie-ins, (such as books and TV series), may help to encourage new or young players to pick-up a RPG, most of these games also help out once players start using the rule set. For example, they often have more straightforward language than full-blown RPG titles; they usually keep character generation short and to the point; and they typically offer accessible page layouts.

ADVANCED FIGHTING FANTASY

This title is a shade more advanced than the solo game-books of the same name, but far from complicated. Advanced Fighting Fantasy is available as a glossy book and offers a complete fantasy RPG. The popularity of the game-books seems likely to make it all the easier to encourage young players to try out Advanced Fighting Fantasy.

ADVENTURES IN OZ

Time to set off along the Yellow Brick Road for RPG gameplay set in Oz. The book and the film have stood the test of time and it won't be a surprise when movie producers decide to give Oz another try at the box office. Until then Adventures in Oz offers child-friendly gameplay with enough roleplaying options to keep adults at the table.

BASH AKA BASIC ACTION GAMES

What no superheroes? Not a problem as BASH aka Basic Action Super Heroes Ultimate Edition covers all the essentials in a compact rule set that's straightforward and accessible to younger players. The game also looks the part and headlines an extended range of RPG offerings based around the same rules-light - but not sparse - framework.

BUFFY

Buffy is a full RPG, which is suited to teenagers rather than kids. It has gone in and out of publication at various stages, but is well worth tracking down. The mechanics aren't particularly complex and the game is well-known for recreating the style and atmosphere of the TV series. There is also a similar RPG from Eden Studios for Angel.

DO: PILGRIMS OF THE FLYING TEMPLE

This storytelling game started-out with a very successful Kickstarter scheme. It's a collaborative storytelling game where the players' characters set-out on a fantasy adventure. Strategy and imagination combine to build the story of the PC's journey, but things don't go quite to plan and the adventurers frequently run into trouble. The game's sense of humor is a plus, as is the very appealing artwork.

The game plays in a roughly similar manner to Happy Birthday Robot, (shown below), so there's no need for a GM. Kids of 7+, and possibly younger, should have no problem learning the game quickly. An expansion pack called Do: The Book of Letters extends the gameplay.

FAERY'S TALE DELUXE

Faery's tale is aimed at players of 6+. Players take on the role of fairies, such as a pixie, a brownie or a sprite, and explore Brightwood. The game includes three ready-to-run adventures.

HARVESTERS

Animals, such as badgers and squirrels, become the heroic characters at the heart of adventures which are otherwise similar to typical fantasy RPG gameplay. In other words, you have character classes like knights, wizards and druids, but they take the form of a variety of wildlife.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY ROBOT

Young players enjoy shared storytelling as they take it in turns to write the tale of Robot's birthday. While the players decide the what, where, when and how of the Robot's day, they never know how much they'll be able to add during one turn, as the game's key mechanic gives a limited number of words to be used each turn. No GM required, but you do need a bundle of D6s on hand.

KIDS DUNGEON ADVENTURE

Pre-school RPG rules may not be necessary, but Kids Dungeon Adventure goes a long way towards suggesting they can offer plenty of fun. The game offers a very easy, flexible system that works alongside kids' other toys to build adventures. The site is

particularly good at showing what the game has to offer, so a visit is highly recommended.

KIDS AND CRITTERS

This 3 in 1 pack includes a woodland/ wildlife RPG called Tales from the Wood; a jolly kids in ideal England RPG called Lashings of Ginger Beer; and a . . . Prairie Dog RPG. The first is all rabbits and badgers gameplay comparable in some ways to Warrior Cats; the second is all about mysteries and adventures in Scooby Doo takes itself too seriously mode; while the last is . . . unique?

LEGO HEROICA

The Lego brand and a simple rule set make the Heroica range very appealing to kids of 5+. However, the built-in adventures are a bit railroading and focused on beating-up on monsters. The game really comes into its own when you start to patch the rules and mix-up the gameplay to build on the basic framework. In other words, it may start out as a dungeon crawl, but there's nothing to stop anyone from turning it into a mix of exploration, roleplaying and some beating-up on monsters.

LONE WOLF MULTIPLAYER GAME

Joe Dever's Lone Wolf books are probably the best known solo game-books after the Fighting Fantasy series. The RPG uses the same simple mechanics to encourage players of the books to step up to a RPG. As a result of the success of the books, the game has the added advantage of a fully fleshed-out game-world and plenty of add-ons.

MEDDLING KIDS

There's not a lot of guesswork required to work out the game's theme. Players set off on comic adventures and investigations much along the lines of the TV format. Solving mysteries in spooky locations is central to the gameplay, as is having a laugh about the characters and tropes from the TV series. The game has a lot to offer through its almost universally familiar backdrop - and the expectations that come out of that in terms of suggesting actions and options for players to try out on the basis of their knowledge of the TV shows.

MERMAID ADVENTURES

Mermaid Adventures describes itself as a “RPG of Undersea Fun!” Players take the part of a mermaid and go about forming friendships while taking on sea monsters and solving mysteries. The game is suitable for kids of 4+ and full of very colorful line art. The core book has sample adventures and there’s a matching coloring book.

MOUSE GUARD

Mouse Guard is a beautifully presented storytelling RPG. It has, perhaps, the most complicated rules system among the games shown here. However, the strong support for story-building, the series of popular Mouse Guard books and the setting built around the books make for an excellent game. It's possibly more a game to be run by adults or teenagers - but younger players with a basic idea of how RPGs are played are likely to enjoy the game.

THE PRINCESS GAME

The players roleplay different parts of the thoughts of a young girl, e.g. her love, her curiosity, her fear and her imagination. They

players then set off to see what they can find and imagine in the world. It plays a bit like other easy story-builders such as Happy Birthday Robot and is available under a creative commons, non-commercial, attribution license. It would not be hard to also play it as 'The Prince Game'.

RENEGADE

It was a bit of a surprise to find that the many recent clones based on the original RPG by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson don't seem to include much content aimed directly at children and young adults. This straightforward, but full, version of the most popular RPG out there makes a number of changes to the standard content and presentation of content to deliver a family-friendly take on classic RPG gameplay. It's free to download from Thistle Games.

RORY'S STORY CUBES

Roll the dice and tell a story based on the images that turn-up. Rory's Story Cubes are fun, inexpensive, open to all ages, no set-up required and easy to use in schools and libraries. There are now extra packs including Action/ 'verb' cubes for describing actions, the standalone Voyages for epic adventure stories and an iPhone option.

TOON

Toon brings cartoon characters into a RPG which is all about recreating the comic mayhem of classic cartoon heroes. You can make any cartoon character you like and then play through adventures in cartoon worlds where the special powers are those of cartoon comedy, which means characters need never die - because they can always pop back into shape.

THE SECRET LIVES OF GINGERBREAD MEN

Players create gingerbread cookies to act as their character sheets and play the part of gingerbread men in this Christmas-themed title. The sprinkles and toppings on your cookie give special powers to play in game and you simply eat the powers as you use them. Injuries are treated in the same manner - just tear a chunk off your cookie and eat it. The game is highly recommended across a wide age range for use in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

WARRIOR CATS

This one's a beautifully produced, short, free RPG based on Erin Hunter's books of the same name. It's suitable for players perhaps as young as 5 and the fiction titles add new, ready-to-run adventures as more books are released. It's also easily adaptable to playing with all manner of animals, including our personal variant Sabretooth.

WITCH GIRLS ADVENTURE

Witch Girls Adventure is a fantasy game about the lives of young mistresses of magic. The Witch Girl books and cartoons provide plenty of support to help to encourage kids to give the game a try. The rules aren't complicated and suit the age range of the popular books, i.e. 7+.



PART 2: GETTING STARTED

ROLEPLAYING GAMES

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS

The first and, by some distance, the most popular RPG was put together by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. It now exists in many forms, including the official D&D brand owned by Wizards of the Coast, which is currently preparing to move to a new edition. The branded rules have become progressively longer and more detailed up to and including the 4th Edition.

However, the latest version appears to be taking a step back towards a more straightforward core game – allied to optional add-ons that offer more tactical complexity. Variants include clones based around every official edition released to date, including ideas drawn from the 4th Edition.

CALL OF CTHULHU

The game is largely based on the works of 1920s fantastic horror author H.P. Lovecraft and focuses on dealing with the minions and manifestations of hideous, over the top evil deities. Play is not about collecting treasure or slaying monsters. Instead Call of Cthulhu emphasizes atmosphere and build-up. It's fairly typical to adopt an investigation and revelation approach, where characters are, for the most part, concentrating on surviving against the odds.

GURPS AKA GENERAL, UNIVERSAL ROLEPLAYING SYSTEM

Multi-systems aim to allow players to use the same skeleton key core rules across multiple RPG genres. GURPS allows play across dozens of genres and is also known for emphasizing realism. As a result combat is often deadly and quite authentic.

PATHFINDER

This Open Gaming License based clone of Edition 3.5 of Dungeons and Dragons has made a major success of embedding the game in a rich campaign world and now rivals and at times outstrips the official Dungeons and Dragons brand.

SWORDS AND WIZARDRY

Among the many clones of earlier versions of Dungeons and Dragons, Swords & Wizardry re-captures much of the essence of early, improvisational gameplay. It is also a well-supported game with whole books of extra creatures and numerous scenarios available to players. Thistle Games' clones Corruption and Renegade use similar mechanics and are part of a much wider pool of readily or immediately compatible rules-light games.

TRAVELER

The cut-down booklet form of the original Traveler SciFi RPG made for a dramatic change from the spells and heroics of Dungeons and Dragons. Before starting play characters went through a careers millstone, which gave them skills at the expense of numerous risks and considerable aging. Combat was also deadly and, while recent versions tend to be more forgiving, the game remains popular for most styles of SciFi RPG gameplay, e.g. Space Opera and hard SciFi.

WORLD OF DARKNESS

The supernatural World of Darkness titles concern vampires, werewolves and such like. Vampire: the Requiem and Mage: the Ascension are the two best known titles released under the system. The games are not everyone's idea of fun and can be unsettling for

some players. Nevertheless, WoD proved popular for a time and placed horror RPGs into a more gritty, (marginally), less over the top backdrop than Call of Cthulhu.

ROGUE TRADER

Dark Heresy, Deathwatch, Only War and Rogue Trader are all part of a series of related 'space marine' RPGs. They have a very detailed, dark, dystopian backdrop and more rules than you can shake a stick at. However, they are examples of rules-heavy RPGs that can be played in a flexible, quite improvisational manner once players have invested time in reading and playing through the rules. This is particularly true of Rogue Trader, which is all about massive, interstellar starships trading over vast stretches of extremely hazardous space. The trading angle within Rogue Trader encourages gameplay that opens up into a wide range of roleplaying options, so espionage, trade and diplomacy get a chance to shine.

FLASHING BLADES

This is a fairly rules-light, historical RPG with a Three Musketeers meets the dastardly Cardinal Richelieu theme, which extends into areas covering the Duelists and Napoleonic adventures. The rules invite some patching, but there's a lot of fun in a system where characters are mortal, yet able to pull off plenty of swashbuckling heroic stunts.

RENEGADE

It's probably far from surprising to find Thistle Games' own clone is put forward as an example of an Old School take on the original RPG rules by Dave Arneson and Gary E. Gygax. The idea of most clones is to revisit the rules light, improvisational gameplay found

in early RPGs. For some this means re-shaping the rules; while for others – including Renegade - it's about introducing a new emphasis, e.g. theming games and campaign design. Clones are generally an inexpensive way to play RPGs and systems such as Swords & Wizardry or Renegade are easy to translate in and out of the Original Game.

Wikipedia keeps a very long list of tabletop RPGs:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_role-playing_games_by_name

ROLEPLAYING GAME GENRES

There are thousands of RPGs to choose from and at least one or two for almost any genre imaginable. The genres and games listed here are just a short selection of the available options:

RPG GENRES TABLE

No.	Genre	Examples
1	Cyberpunk	Shadowrun
2	Espionage	Blowback or Spycraft
3	Fantasy	Dungeons and Dragons or Renegade
4	Historical	Flashing Blades
5	Horror	All Flesh is Eaten or Call of Cthulhu
6	Modern	Spycraft, Blowback or D20 Modern
7	Multisystem	Savage Worlds and GURPs
8	Post-Apocalypse	Gamma World
9	SciFi	Traveler, Rogue Trader, Dark Heresy or Deathwatch

No.	Genre	Examples
10	Space Opera	Traveler or Star Wars RPG
11	Steampunk	Space: 1889
12	Superhero	Marvel Roleplaying Game
13	Supernatural	Buffy RPG or Dresden Files
14	Western	Aces and Eights or Deadlands

Wikipedia also has an extensive list of RPGs arranged by genre, which is probably a more useful way to search:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_role-playing_games_by_genre

ROLEPLAYING GAME PROPS

Adding a few props to a tabletop RPG game can be a lot of fun. Most are best used fairly sparingly, as props tend to lose their effect if the GM turns up looking like an extra from yet another Harry Potter movie.

BOARDGAMES

Boardgame accessories, counters and pieces are an excellent source of props. Dice, wooden counters, plastic counters, casino chips, coins and plastic tokens are just some of the inexpensive extras available from specialist suppliers. Some boardgames that you already have in your games collection may even lend themselves to this, e.g. Dread Pirate is a simple introductory boardgame, which trades almost entirely on its piratical look and feel.

BRICKS

Jenga and Lego are the top picks here for fairly obvious reasons, i.e. very flexible, unbreakable and both are probably sitting around the

house anyway. By far the cheapest way to buy lots of Lego is on eBay by the kilo or pound. It's even cheaper still to ask around and see if anyone has a box or two stuck in the attic. In either case there's a fair chance the whole lot will need a good clean in soapy water.

CANDY

There's candy and there's serious candy. A few skull-shaped milk gums are OK but there's a lot more on offer out there if you look around. Bleeding hearts, exploding jelly skulls and large edible spiders are all highly recommended. We wouldn't advise too much at one go and it takes a bit of searching to get more interesting or unique items. Candy Warehouse, home to Candy Blood Cherry Liquid Bags and the classic Apple Flavored Green Candy Warts, is a good place to start, (with a categories search), but don't show the kids - this is extreme candy!

COUNTERS

It's possible to play RPGs without maps, figures or counters. However, many players find it easier to get involved and to know what's going on if there's a rough 'floor plan' map on the table.

Spending a little extra cash to get some painted fantasy figures to show where PCs are on the map is money well spent. Some players also pay for and paint metal figures to represent NPCs, monsters and items like treasure chests. This looks great, but figure painting is a hobby in itself, and new players can be left wondering how they'll ever get their game to look as good.

Counters, (such as colored stones, glass beads, casino chips, boardgame counters and plastic RPG counters), provide a very easy, and inexpensive, way to show what's going on and to make the table look good.

Alea Tools magnetic counters arrive in various packs and can be placed on the table as monster, treasure and condition markers when there aren't enough figures to go round. The markers can also be placed beneath figures to indicate their current status, e.g. stunned, confused, or fireballed! Combining Alea's counters with magnetic boards is a further option that lets mapping move on to the wall.

Inexpensive counters such as Tracker Tokens are good for keeping track of what's going on at the table and making the tabletop a rich source of information during play, i.e. attention grabbing.

The tokens, counters and other gadgetry made by Dapper Devil help out in much the same way as other counter collections, but they offer some unusual/ extra options.

DICE

There are many different types of colored, shaped game dice available to buy. Those shown are unusual examples:

The combinations shown on this remarkable 18-dice-in-one are easy to read and keep the dice real without having to carry a whole bunch around:

<http://www.gmdice.com/d-total-dice-18-dice-in-one>

There are five Giant Foam Polyhedral Dice in this set - each about 3” across. The dice include D4, D8, D10, D12 and D20 variants in a mix of colors:

<https://www.thinkgeek.com/geektoys/games/e588/>

Probably not the most practical choice for the table, but good for a party gift:

<http://www.geeksoap.net/product/D20-soap-on-a-rope-geeksoap>

DRAGONS

Nobody really needs a garage-sized dragon, but that doesn’t stop us wanting one:

<http://www.davescooltoys.com/davesblog/images/hansa-grand-dragon.jpg>

<http://www.creativityinstitute.com/Hansa-Great-Dragon-Ride-On-Plush-Stuffed-Animal.aspx>

FALSE DOCUMENTS

Making realistic, but not too realistic, blueprints, passports, currencies and coded messages is more about being able to access a computer and printer than needing to buy props. Homemade documents made by yourself can be specific to your campaign and offer players a hands-on slice of authenticity. Wikipedia and Wikimedia Commons can be particularly helpful as sources of raw materials, as many out-of-date official documents, stamps and images are available for download.

FANTASY MAPS

Get the colored markers and a few large sheets of paper out and ask the kids to design parts of the RPG setting and adventures. As kids

get older they may want cleaner/ more polished maps, so sketch, review, copy and link as required. The place names don't need to be particularly clever and the drawing can be pretty ragged, so long as there's plenty of color involved.

Adding glitter and stickers isn't going to suit every young player, but a lot of that depends on the decoration on offer. If the glitter comes out of a gel pen and the stickers feature a bunch of monsters, chances are the kids will enjoy slowly turning a basic map into a collage.

Adults may prefer to pass on the glitter and choose from a wide selection of ready-made maps that can be bought online.

FIGURES

Counters add visual clarity, typography and status updates at the table, but they aren't nearly as rich a visual medium as miniature figures. It is, therefore, quite helpful to have figures to represent player characters. I.e. it doesn't matter whether you're positioning a character on a battle grid or simply lining-up a party of characters in marching order; figures immediately add to a tabletop game's sense of authenticity.

Painted, metal miniatures are the standard option for most players, but younger players may enjoy playing with larger plastic figures. For example, widely available Papo, Safari and Schleich figures are not cheap, but the size, weight, sculpture and painting all add up to an eye-catching line-up for younger players. Collecting enough of these figures to line up a party of adventurers is not that expensive

and counters can then help to show monsters and what's happening on the tabletop:

<http://toys.scholarschoice.ca/products/Papo-Two-Headed-Gold-Dragon-p39879/?pstart=1>

Cardboard figures are an inexpensive option, which work well if you look around for high quality artwork and durable card:

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Okumarts-Games/188520267860500>

FLOOR PLANS AND CARD SCENERY

The paper-cut scenery offered by Fat Dragon Games is known for offering good quality and decent value. For those who prefer floor plans the sets from Inked Adventures are good examples of what's available:

<http://www.fatdragongames.com/fdgfiles/>

<http://www.inkedadventures.com/main/>

GLITTER JAR

A glitter jar for kids, which is more impressive than it sounds:

<http://intellokids.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/kids-fairy-dust-craft.html>

HORRIBLE FOOD

Serving up some 'horrible' or at least questionable looking food during breaks goes down a treat - so long as the food actually tastes good. The Celebrity in the Jungle Bushtucker Trial approach is not good, because making players eat mustard and chili powder isn't really that funny. Leave the poisoning up to the celebrities and serve up a tasty Orcs' Stew or a Devil's Cheesecake as a mystery meal.

MARKERS

Floor plans and scenery are great if you can afford them and like that style of play. However, large sheets of paper and some decent marker pens can be very effective for presenting basic layouts/building maps and then zooming in as adventurers explore by annotating and doodling on the map. Let the group jot damage taken, opponents met and similar details on the sheet and the maps will end-up like a sketch report of the session.

PUZZLES

The Happy Puzzle Company is an excellent source of learning games for UK players. There are some gameplay gems among the candy-coated learning. For example, the Scrambled Egg Silhouette Puzzle could be used to give players who construct certain shapes a selection of optional extra powers. Perhaps not something you'd want in every session but potentially amusing if your players like occasional puzzles.

The Happy Puzzle Company also has books which specialize in particular types of puzzles. It's generally not a good idea to make completing puzzles either central to play or 'mission critical', but 'Brain Boosting Lateral Thinking Puzzles' and 'Brain Boosting Sequence Puzzles' can add a bit of variety to general gameplay.

SCENERY

<http://www.terraclips3d.com/>

<http://www.dwarvenforge.com/>

SWORDS AND SHIELDS

Making your own armor and weaponry is going a bit far for most adult players. However, cardboard shields, carton roll swords,

adhesive darts, web sprayers, foam string blasters and a few Halloween masks can make for a pretty overexcited outdoors game session. Add a few Treasure Hunt and basic wide-game or Alternate Reality Game (ARG) elements and, so long as you keep it safe, there's an inexpensive party or two in there.

TEMPORARY TATTOOS

Most players can put on temporary water-based tattoos without any problems. Sharks, serpents, pirates, monsters and legendary creatures are among the options. Kids love them and they can last a few days if you put them in the right places, e.g. the inside of a forearm. Rather obviously, any instructions need to be followed and it's best not to stick six on one child until you've checked that the first one doesn't cause a rash. Beyond two or three days it's generally advisable to wash them off.

TOUCH TABLETS

The iPad, recent Android phones and a swathe of touch tablets on the way from Amazon, Google and others are starting to show their worth. GM utilities and character-building apps are beginning to appear; rule sets are getting passed around the table in PDF and web browser formats; and many mobile phones already have dice apps built in.

The range of dedicated RPG apps is mixed at this stage, but access to browser features, PDFs and online services like Dropbox are already demonstrating that tablets can be more of a help than a hindrance around the table.

TREASURE

Handing out 'real' loot to players as they adventure adds an amusing touch to the entertainment. Inexpensive plastic coins, gems and ingots are available in many toy and novelty stores. For those with lots of cash there are also specialist suppliers of metal coins of various weights and emblems:

<http://www.campaigncoins.com/store/boxset/starter-kit.html>

<http://www.musedfable.com/>

<http://www.greatamericancoincompany.com/Pirate-Coins-and-Doubloons-c5.html>

WANDS

Buying an expensive remote control device to run presentations on projectors is hardly necessary for a typical group of players. However, Friendly Local Game Store (FLGS) owners, clubs looking to recruit or those running games for kids' parties and such like could use one of these wands to run gaming events, including orchestrating entire events from the comfort of the GM's chair:

<http://www.thewandcompany.com/>

FINDING A GAME

FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Friends and family may not rush to sign up for a full-blown RPG to start with, but they may be up for it if the options start out with a boardgame like Talisman or a very 'quick start' RPG like Risus. Special occasions can be a good time to try this, e.g. we've played Monopoly every year - let's give something else a try'. It may help to go in steps, e.g. from Monopoly to Zooloretto - and then on to Dread Pirate and Dominion.

Friends and family are also sources of plenty of friends of friends. You're going to have some background information on players from this group, so it's well worth asking around. Online friends and online games are an option, but your local network of clubs, friends and potential friends offer a clear route to playing face-to-face on a regular basis with people you already know about.

CLUBS AND SOCIETIES

Established clubs and societies are a good option and UK college and university campuses in particular have a longstanding record of running active RPG clubs. It is, however, a club, so testing the water and mapping out the inevitable clan factions calls for a certain amount of caution.

FORUMS

As with any other remote media it's not easy to be sure who you're really dealing with in a RPG forum. It follows that meeting someone face-to-face for a game through an online forum carries the same concerns as any random gathering. Over time it may be possible to track signature links to RPG companies or blogs and find out more about a poster. However, that only becomes more certain if there's a named owner and it's a company site rather than a personal site. Forums are of more use when arranging to meet in public as part of a group of players or when looking for online games.

FLGS

Friendly Local Game Stores are comparable to clubs and societies. They can provide a safe place to try out a good variety of games. Shops with enough room to run a few games at the same time,

(which also run starter games and events for beginners), are likely candidates.

GROUPS

Traditional online RPG forums are hidden away in quiet corners of the Internet and this lack of visibility tends to encourage trolling, grandstanding and the formation of in-crowds. Larger social platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, certainly seem to present fewer concerns, as social connections linked to gaming tend to bleed over into other topics and the scale of these global platforms appears to make visitors much less likely to troll or grandstand. In addition, the transparency of social connections and the wider sharing of personal information on a platform like Facebook makes it easier to find out a bit more about other players' backgrounds and gaming interests before any face-to-face meetings. There is still a need to be careful, as deception and identity theft can occur on any platform. That said by connecting, (and possibly playing), online before meeting up players can build up a good impression of whoever they're planning to meet. This is not about screening or profiling other players; but is about sharing the same safe social space and forming the basis of friendships.

MEET~UPS

Using social networking sites specifically aimed at connecting people on a face-to-face level, including Meetup itself, has brought together lots of players. A large group set-up on a high profile site can be similar to a club or society, often running events that are large enough and sufficiently public to make it safe to go along.

ACTUAL PLAYS

The following Actual Plays are typical of rules light fantasy gameplay where the rules are kept in the background, i.e. the engine's running but you can barely hear it.

They demonstrate games played with relatively low numbers, as these tend to offer the most rewarding and compelling approaches to play. It's also significantly easier to design, to recruit and to keep the attention of players who are frequently taking an active part in the gameplay instead of waiting for their next turn to come round.

Working with groups of 8 or 10 players at the table can be fun, but is clearly harder to set up and sustain over weeks and months. It's also difficult to run such games as anything more than straightforward, often linear, adventures - because zooming in on a particular character's role keeps other players waiting in a queue. This effect is reinforced by the focus on an individual character's turn resulting from the 'social distance' between characters and players that is created by slicing each character's involvement into an isolated slot in a queue.

The Actual Plays shown are both quite combative and use fairly breathless pacing, but this is easily mediated by the Old School style of play used in both examples. The adventurers' lives are in constant peril and the players have to think on their feet. However, there are solutions to the genuine threats to PCs' lives to be found in both their skills and in the situations they encounter. Players who try to grind out 'results' under such circumstances will be

killed more often than not, until they realize that there are times when it's better to take to their heels and to live to fight another day.

SEVEN TIMES THE COLOR OF FIRE

This is an Actual Play from a 1:1 freeform game of RPG Treasure. The game could as easily have been run with a rules-light version of Dungeons and Dragons or as a SciFi or fantasy scenario using the free version of the rules for Traveler.

The section shown below includes the rolls made during play to illustrate where the game's mechanics are stepping in and out of the gameplay:

LEAD-IN

Coco has already knocked-out a couple of goblins; then wounded, healed and befriended a timber wolf; before dueling with a goblin shaman. During interrogation one of the goblins has told her it's safe to drink from a fountain, but Coco refused the invitation and evaporated some of the water from the poisoned fountain to form a blade venom.

#1

After tipping her arrows with poison Coco checks out three frayed tapestries with large white skull logos painted over them. She tears one down, revealing a doorway, and decides to wash the cloth in the poisoned water. The paint fades and a fleur-de-lis crest emerges.

The second tapestry hides another doorway and a tapestry with twin fleur-de-lis crests.

Two goblins enter through the first doorway. They try to rush Coco as she lifts her bow. 2D6, 12, multipliers kick in, the arrow tears through the first goblin's armor and stops him dead. The second raises his mace but the (goblin-hating) wolf behind him has first roll. 2D6, 7, the wolf's fangs catch the goblin on his trailing leg. The goblin strikes at the wolf. 2D6, 7 but he's off balance. He catches the wolf a glancing blow. The wolf pins the goblin to the ground.

Coco binds and gags the surviving goblin and searches both goblins. She keeps a gem, a mace and a spare dagger. The new dagger gets a layer of poison on the blade. There's a stop to heal the wolf's bruises and teach it basic commands. It learns to follow simple gestures for sit, wait and go forward, back, left or right and attack before there's a shout from the hall beyond the first doorway.

The shout isn't in a language Coco understands. As she advances down the hall a large, heavily-armored ogre steps out of a doorway. He turns, sees her and runs towards her. Coco moves away, turns and fires her bow. 2D6, 4, the arrow only hits the familiar flaming skull design on the ogre's shield. The wolf, now known as Flame, 2D6, 6, chews on the ogre's chainmail without causing any damage.

The ogre strikes at Coco. 2D6, 11, bruises her ribs and knocks the wind out of her. Sore one! Coco lets the wolf go first and, 2D6, 8, it catches the ogre, which twists round. Coco goes for a quick

backstab, 2D6, 9, the damage multiplier helps out and the ogre is badly wounded. Then the poison on the dagger kicks in.

Despite the cost Coco has to heal herself properly, as another similar injury would kill her. Poor rolls see four of the five gems carried by the ogre used up right away.

The doorway the ogre emerged from leads to a cell block with signs of just one recent prisoner. A further door leads to a large, dimly lit chamber. A fire in a grand hearth provides most of the light, but there's a musty, moldering smell in the air. Flame is reluctant to go in. The furnishings include a very long oak table cluttered with cartons, boxes, bunches of dried herbs and flowers, potion bottles, crucibles, and pestles and mortars.

When Coco moves forward the only occupants come into view at the far end of the chamber. Two figures 'stand' before a granite throne. One is hooded, cloaked, crowned and using one arm to lift the other from the ground by the throat. The second is a young, raven-haired man gasping for breath as the skeletal hand jutting from the cloak chokes him.

The hooded figure hears Coco enter and turns to investigate, without releasing the youth. Light falls across the figure's star-spangled cloak and its skeletal, hollowed-out husk of a face. Coco recognizes her enemy and looses her only enchanted arrow. 2D6, 10, the arrow catches the Lich at the wrist, sending up a shower of fragmented bone. Poison has no effect but the creature casts the youth aside.

2D6, 8, and a bolt of lightning screams through the air, catching Coco at the shoulder. The shock burns deep into her flesh and she cries out in pain. A single spell has brought her near to death.

Coco runs out of the chamber and back towards the long stairway that led to this level. She can't see the Lich when she pauses for breath. Flame tries to stop its progress. A wave of a hand and the wolf lies whimpering in a corner. Coco keeps running and gets to the stairs. The Lich can move faster than her and is gaining ground. By the time she gets close to the top of the stairs it's near to catching her.

Out of breath, Coco turns to face her attacker. He advances to within a few yards, leaving Coco with only enough time for a single action. The girl draws two daggers but doesn't strike out. Instead she throws herself straight at the Lich.

2D6, 9, she hits the Lich, knocking it and herself over and down the stone steps. Coco tries to catch both daggers between the lattice of bones and bandages forming the Lich's chest. 2D6, 11 and 3. One catches and Coco is able to use the Lich as a sledge while they both glide down the steps. The bone-jangling ride rattles the Lich's spine over half the distance of the steps.

Both Coco and the Lich roll to see if they can stop their fall. 2D6 for the Lich, 5 and Coco, 8. Coco can let go of the dagger and fall off but opts to stay on and continue the ride. The pair sledge on down the rest of the stairs, with the Lich's bones cracking and crunching

all the way. There's a wretched, snapping sound just before they both tumble out into the room below.

Coco is still smoldering, badly wounded and stunned. She seems to slip in and out of consciousness. Until a warm, rasping tongue licks her full in the face. Flame's alive!

. . . and the Lich? Its broken body is twisted back on itself at the snap in its spine. Eyes that burnt like white hot coals are now cold and dim. Coco has broken Seven Times the Color of Fire.

Sure, she knows he isn't gone for good, but his soul has to seek out a new host and that buys her time. As for the beast's crown, dared she even touch it?

#2

Coco picks herself up and listens for sounds of trouble. Everything is quiet, apart from the occasional muffled complaint from the captured goblin. She places the Lich's bones in the poisoned water in the fountain. The water fizzes and froths around the bones; then churns until the bones dissolve away. A sweet, sickly odor fills the air.

The Lich's star-sprayed robe and the jeweled crown feel unnaturally cold to the touch. Coco puts the crown in her backpack. Coco's wolf Flame, and Coco herself, need healing but the raven-haired youth stumbles through the first doorway before she gets started. He looks washed out and still blue in the face. He sees the robe on the floor and says, 'Impossible!'

[No one has triggered an alarm but there's an opportunity to turn up the heat/ roleplaying]

The second doorway opens almost immediately and a tall man with the facial tattoos of a Lich's disciple looks into the chamber. He gazes at Coco, the youth and the robes lying on the flagstones and says, "Impossible!"

Coco turns to the sorcerer and calmly states, "I came here to be your minion."

The puzzled sorcerer replies, "My minion. Like a henchman?"

"More a henchgirl," answers Coco.

The youth says, "You can't do that!"

The sorcerer asks, "What do we do with him?"

"Lock him up. We can find something to do with him later," replies Coco.

2D6, 8. The sorcerer fires a successful Web spell at the young man and shouts for two goblins to take him away. The sorcerer also asks about the crown and Coco explains that it went into the water with the bones; and how everything turned frothy until the bones and the crown dissolved. She's shown to the 'apprentice's' chambers and told she'll be invited to visit the sorcerer in the throne room later.

The room is a lantern-lit, cluttered mess of scrolls, papers, books and filthy plates. One wall is completely covered with shelves containing a strange collection of dried rodents, foul-scented plants and jars full of insects. Flame goes to rest in the cot set in an alcove at the far end of the chamber but soon thinks better of the idea.

Coco checks outside and smiles briefly at two goblins guarding the entrance, before going back in. Despite the shambles she searches the room thoroughly. 2D6, 3. She finds nothing. 2D6, 2. She finds nothing and knocks over a jar of dried frogs, which smashes on the floor. The goblins look in and Coco gestures for a brush and shovel. They don't want to come in and go back to guarding the doorway.

Coco has another try. 2D6, 8. She finds a secret compartment hidden behind a stack of rotten books. 2D6, 9, there's a poisoned needle trap. Coco tries to disarm the trap, 2D6, 11, then unlock it, 2D6, 4. She can't get in.

A Shatter spell, 2D6, 8, takes the hatch off and Coco finally gets her hands on two scrolls and a bag of, 2D6, ten gems. The gems fuel her spellcasting and each successive, successful casting increases her chances. 2D6, 5, 7, 10, 6. Three of the spells work and she's about to heal the wolf when the door opens.

The two goblins flank the sorcerer, who's wearing the Lich's robe and holding an ornate sacred dagger. "I'll need the crown now. I've checked the Lich's papers and it can't be dissolved!"

After casting three successful spells in a row, Coco is charged with magic (+3). She targets her only ritual at the corridor and rolls, 2D6, 7. Just enough, a Fire Storm explodes in the corridor, consuming her opponents in sheets of flame. The two goblins are toppled in the blast and the sorcerer stands smoldering. The Lich's robe is untouched but the rest of his clothes and his hair are largely gone. Flame leaps forward, 2D6, 12, the sorcerer takes a savage wound - but it's his turn now.

2D6, 7, not quite enough to get Coco! Coco is now on a +4 bonus to cast a spell or ritual and sends a Snowball shooting at the Lich. 2D6, 6, enough with her bonuses. The 2D6 damage doesn't finish him off but he's committed to a hand-to-hand attack next turn. Flame attacks, 2D6, 4, and misses.

The furious sorcerer advances with his dagger in hand and rolls 2D6, 9. The dagger tears at Coco's arm, though it's less damaging than the Meteor she might have expected. Coco considers holding off for a backstab but she's on a +5 spellcasting bonus and still has some gems left. A second Snowball, 2D6, 8 – and the sorcerer lies unconscious . . .

FRANKINCENSE

This is an actual play run with clone Renegade. It could have played out in the much the same way using Dungeons and Dragons, Labyrinth Lord or Swords & Wizardry:

THE PARTY

Frankincense - 7th Level Paladin played by Mandy

Thunderstruck - 8th Level Cleric played by Al
Kiss - 9th Level Elf Magic-User played by Jenny
Stick - 6th Level Drow Renegade aka Thief played by Rob

ACTUAL PLAY

The player characters (PCs) agreed to be hired as neutrals to carry-out a hostage exchange in return for a generous payment of 500 gold pieces/ head. Unfortunately when they arrived at the rendezvous the emissaries acting for the neighboring nation were found lying dead on the ground. The hostage the PCs were supposed to collect has vanished and they now seem to be stuck with the prisoner they were meant to hand over.

The wounds on the bodies of the six dead escorts are identifiable as spear injuries and they appear to have been struck at high impact. Quite messy! There are no obvious signs or tracks from any kind of cavalry.

The players were instructed to keep a sack over the prisoner's head throughout the journey, but a muffled voice wants to know what's happening.

Frankincense: I reach over and untie the sack to see what he has to say.

Stick: Hold on. Could be a reason why the bag's on the head.

Kiss: Yeah, like a Medusa.

Frankincense: I look away, tear the sack off and look at her reflection using the polished inside of my shield.

Kiss: I wasn't serious.

Thunderstruck: I'm praying and looking at the sky.

GM: A young woman with red hair and a coronet of all things looks at the corpses strewn on the ground and screams.

Thunderstruck: Pop the sack back on?

Frankincense: Certainly not. I tell her she's safe.

GM: Her expression is one of horror. But she calms down and composes herself.

Stick: I ask her what she knows about the escort - and the other prisoner. Who did this?

GM: Despite being bound she jumps from the horse and then looks around. After 10 or 15 seconds she says, 'Here!' and uses a foot to tease a glistening strand of spider silk out of the long grass.

Kiss: I get my wand ready. This time I'm almost serious.

Frankincense: I ask what kind of spider uses a spear and doesn't wrap its prey.

Thunderstruck: Spiders with saddles.

Stick: The other prisoner?

GM: She spits and says, 'He's a war criminal called Adrack Helm.' You know him by reputation. In the nation you are working for he's a famed and much decorated war hero.

Frankincense: We can't work for war criminals.

Kiss: Don't start. She's probably making it up and we won't get paid – again!

Frankincense: I try to detect good in her.

GM: Good – with a twist of chaos.

Frankincense: We must find and expose the war criminal.

Stick: Is there a bounty?

Thunderstruck: How about we find out what's going on? I pray to my god to allow me to speak with one of the dead - the one with the best armor.

GM: The leader's body opens its eyes. She looks a mess - deep wounds to the neck and chest. There's no spark of life in the bleak stare that comes out of her eyes.

Thunderstruck: OK – I'm sorry for waking you but I could do with help catching your killers . . . I ask if her attackers were her employers.

GM: The corpse shakes her head – a few teeth fall out.

Thunderstruck: . . . or their allies?

GM: The corpse nods its head.

Thunderstruck: . . . were there more than ten attackers?

GM: The corpse nods her head and blood starts to trickle from the mouth.

Thunderstruck: . . . did they go north?

GM: The head remains still.

Thunderstruck: Thank goodness for that. Did they arrive from the north?

GM: The head shakes. Not a lot of teeth left and the wound on her neck opens wide.

Thunderstruck: Did they arrive from the south?

GM: The head nods a bit too hard, there's a short tearing sound and the head rolls off into his lap. The hostage shrieks!

Thunderstruck: Eh, I cover the body with my cloak. I get my spade. We'll bury her.

GM: The hostage is not used to seeing battlefield wounds. But she's not spineless and quickly settles down.

Kiss: If we take her to her home we might get a reward. If we take her back we still get paid.

GM: The prisoner says, 'That thing with the guard – gross. We won't make it halfway in either direction. The exchange may have been in the name of peace, but it's a set-up.'

Stick: Chances are we're being framed. That leaves ditch the girl and go northwest or head south and catch up with Adrack Whatshisname?

Frankincense: South!

Thunderstruck: Why not – south it is!

Kiss: Oh go on then.

ABOUT AN HOUR LATER

GM: Your caution is well-advised. You find plenty of cover in the shadows all the way until you're almost at the entrance. This gives you a clear view of the large cavern. It's dimly lit by half-a-dozen large oil lanterns set into raised alcoves and there's a lit brazier in

the center of the chamber. The place is obviously the holding area for the giant spiders.

Two spiders and their goblin guards are mounted up in the middle of the floor space, with an ogre barking out instructions they've to follow on patrol. There are also eight iron portcullises set into alcoves at regular intervals around the walls. Four of the large niches contain giant spiders held behind these gates.

A stock of a dozen spider wraps - silk-wrapped humanoid spider victims - lies in the far corner on the left. The casings look full and you think you can see the odd motion as living victims writhe inside the deadly cocoons. It's hard to tell for sure as the cave is quite gloomy in the corners.

Stick: Are there enough shadows for me to hide in if I go in?

GM: The shadows aren't as deep as in the tunnel, so you have your normal chance of hiding in the shadows.

Stick: I tug twice on the string to signal for the others to follow and try to creep into the cave.

GM: Roll under your target score.

GM: Good roll. You make it into the shadows without being detected by the goblins or the ogre. However, the spiders are sensitive to vibrations in the ground and do start to become agitated. What's everyone else up to?

Frankincense: I make sure the armor's locked-down, draw my sword and go to find Stick.

Thunderstruck: Shield, flail – me too.

Kiss: I give Azinth a dagger, tell her to stay on look out and advance cautiously. I stick 30' back from the others and begin to prepare a spell.

GM: OK – the spiders' attention turns to the bold advance of the two warriors. This gets the ogre and the goblins interested and the ogre directs them to attack the party. The ogre then turns and starts to head for an exit at the back of the cavern.

Frankincense: We'd better charge, before they get up enough speed to run us through.

Thunderstruck: Charge!

Stick: The spiders are after them and the ogre's back's turned to me?

GM: Good opportunity – I'll roll for surprise on the ogre. Result - you can try a backstab in a moment. The rest of you should roll for initiative.

GM: Not so great for the guys. The spiders and riders get initiative and – ouch – Thunderstruck takes 9 damage from a spear. The other one misses Frankincense, by a mile. Stick, go ahead and roll to hit – and anyone else who's up for it.

Stick: Yes!

GM: Roll damage and multiply.

GM: Wow! – the ogre crumples to his knees beneath the unexpected blow. He won't be getting up again. He was running for a lever on the far wall.

Frankincense: I'm going for the spider. Hah! And . . . 9 and the sword and the strength.

GM: You've wrecked the spider and the goblin on it can't unsaddle and gets his legs caught under the body.

Thunderstruck: 2 – uh! Have I got to change dice already?

Kiss: Magic and missile should fix it. I target the surviving spider. D4s please.

GM: It's still alive and all but on top of Thunderstruck. Someone want to roll initiative?

GM: The spider attempts to sink its fangs into Thunderstruck. I'm afraid it nicks you - only does 3 damage, but one of the fangs has injected poison. Roll a saving throw.

Thunderstruck: 15 - no problem.

GM: The prisoner appears for a moment at the entrance you used to come in. Only to be snatched from behind by a pack of six ogres. They grab her and haul her off into the darkened tunnel.

Kiss: I knew it the minute I left her. We can't let them get away - they'll bring the whole place down on us.

GM: The hostage is fighting back with the dagger you gave her, but they'll be gone in a moment.

Kiss: Can I see past them?

GM: Not really.

Stick: I light a fire arrow and send it in there.

GM: Mmm . . . it's a bit of a rush. Roll a D20 to see if you light the arrow and a D20 for firing it.

Stick: I get more than one missile a round, so I'm fast.

GM: But your bow wasn't ready. Let's see what happens?

GM: That's plenty. Arrow's all fired up, take aim.

GM: There's such a bundle of them that you hit. One of the ogres now has a flaming arrow stuck in his leg and Azinth is struggling to get free.

Kiss: I plant a wall of ice just behind the Ogres.

GM: Now you're all locked in together . . .

Thunderstruck [to Frankincense]: Shall we?

GM: As you advance it's plain to see that one of the ogres is some kind of sorceress. She's all cloak of furs and white on black war-paint. There's also a necklace with an elf's bleached skull hanging from it. A couple of chunky sapphires are jammed in the skull's eye sockets.

Where is everyone? . . . Initiative . . . You're in luck.

Kiss: I cast Haste on Frankincense and Thunderstruck.

GM: OK – assuming they're attacking you have just enough time to target them.

Frankincense and Thunderstruck: We're attacking!

Stick: I go and look at the exit. What's there?

GM: The entrance is about 25' high. It's not well lit, but you see a portcullis in the shadows and a metal lever.

Frankincense: I roll to hit the first ogre – 4 . . . 20 . . . I must've killed it!

GM: Unconscious on the floor and bleeding out.

Thunderstruck: Next . . . 16?

GM: Yes . . . damage noted and again . . . no chance.

Stick: Is the lever connected to the spiders' cages?

GM: It's a mechanical device. Roll for it . . . Right, the lever connects to a heavy, rusty chain inside a hollow running up the wall. You'd need all your strength to pull it. The spiders' cages are more basic devices. Chains hanging on either side of each cage lift the portcullises by brute force.

Pull it right now or wait till next round. It's getting into the ogres' turn.

Stick: Why not? I pull the lever as hard as I can.

GM: Your muscles are about to give in when the lever clicks and the chain triggers a weighted mechanism that starts to raise the large portcullis.

At the other end of the cavern one of the ogres punches Azinth - knocking her out. The sorceress is muttering a spell and the remainder try to strike Thunderstruck and Frankincense with iron-banded clubs.

At which point it becomes completely dark around the entrance to a distance of 15'. Only Stick and Kiss can see what happens next, but they might want to warn the other two. A large, huge, massive spider emerges from the tunnel behind the large portcullis. You probably killed some of its young a few minutes ago. The fangs are so full with a greenish venom that it's dripping on to the stone floor - where it kind of fizzes for a while.

Roll initiative . . . not so good . . . the immense spider gets through the gate and there's a rising scuttling sound as thousands of younger spiders stream down the walls. The vents or tunnels they are using to get in are hidden in shadow.

The ogres sound as if they're battering at the wall of ice, but can't be seen. The immense spider needs to maneuver into the room to corner Stick, so it doesn't get an attack, but has placed itself between you and the rest of the party.

Thunderstruck: How many thousands? And how young?

GM: Roll a D4 each and we'll find out?

Stick: No!

GM: You can only guess at the full numbers but there must be the best part of 10,000 spiders pouring down the walls. On average their bodies are a couple of feet long.

The adventurers are clearly in big trouble and the approach of battling with the enemy until they buckle - common in more rules-heavy gameplay - isn't an option. If the players try to slug it out with these opponents their characters have no chance. The easy way out is to go back through the sheet of ice made by the party's sorcerer and to head for the nearest stairs.

ORGANIZING A GAME

The practicalities of organizing a regular RPG session are easy to arrange with a few texts and/ or a chat.

Costs can be an important consideration for some players - for many reasons. Tabletop RPGs offer remarkable value when compared to, for example, a trip to the cinema that is over and done with inside a couple of hours.

Obviously premium RPGs with subscription fees and/ or 'massively multi-volume' rule sets can be expensive - especially with costs across a group. However there are many mainstream options that cost significantly less.

It's certainly well worth comparing features and prices, e.g. at the time of writing a standard PDF of one clone system costs \$24.99, while other full clones are priced as low as \$3.99. On a feature for

feature basis it's not entirely clear what is gained from spending the extra £21.

ORGANIZING GAMES TABLE

No.	Options	Details
1	Breaks and food/ snacks	
2	Costs	
3	Dice rollers/ dice	
4	GM/ s: designated or hot-seat	
5	Limiting distractions and interruptions	
6	Location	
7	Maps or grids	
8	Numbers	
9	Rule sets	
10	Ruler, paper and pencils	
11	Setting and/ or scenarios/ adventures	
12	Sufficient space	
13	Tables	
14	Tablets, phones and netbooks	
15	Timing	
16	Transport	

SETTING UP A GAME

Tabletop RPGs involve more effort and collaboration than most videogames, as players have to get to the game in the first place and then get along face-to-face. In addition, while a videogame usually

has fixed rules, tabletop RPG players are constantly involved in interpreting rules and novel situations. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that disagreements can interrupt play and slow down the game.

Fortunately, there are a number of approaches to setting up play which can head off or resolve most disagreements.

PERMISSIONS

It's essential to check that any regulations and agreements that need to be sorted out are dealt with as early as possible. Parents and carers are likely to want to be told about the arrangements for games involving kids. (Transport arrangements for kids require particular care). Anyone running a youth club type game might also have to go through police checks. At the same time, players may wish to negotiate for a better playing area or peace from younger siblings.

BOUNDARIES

Concerns about behavior at the gaming table can cause extra complications if players don't raise any likely difficulties early on. For example, if some players aren't happy about the choice of rules it's simpler to discuss that before playing rather than struggle on with disgruntled players during games. Agreements about using mobile phones/ Internet at the table, the length of games, shared goals for the party and what happens when someone can't turn up may be helpful.

INTERRUPTIONS

The fewer the distractions the better the gameplay, as players can stay in-game without having to refocus repeatedly. Permissions and boundaries help to limit some interruptions, but games are often slowed down by players during the game. For instance, if players are using mobile phones at the table it may be because they're waiting for something to happen. Other players may be rolling-up new PCs or discussing the rules in lengthy detail. Preparation before play, (such as having some ready-rolled PCs handy and clearing up interpretations of the rules between games), should keep gameplay at the heart of each session.

PEACE TALKS

Agreeing how to resolve simple disputes during play often cuts out tiresome disagreements. Occasional time-outs allow players to pop out of actual play to consult the GM about the options open to them. These can be replaced or complemented by an agreed and limited number of rules challenges where the PC asks the GM to consider a particular interpretation of the rules.

CONVERSATION

Shared planning of a group's gameplay is increasingly common, as a straightforward discussion of what players would like to get out of a series of adventures or a campaign setting helps GMs to deliver enjoyable play. For many groups this simply involves a chat about the types of environments, opponents and situations players are likely to find interesting.

CAMPAIGN SKETCHING OR OUTLINING

If players are planning a long campaign they may wish to use profiles of players' gameplay preferences and/ or short campaign

planning sessions to ensure the action centers on the types of gameplay that the players are interested in pursuing. Options for player profiles and campaign planning are detailed later.

Questionnaires asking players to set out a wide range of campaign and gameplay preferences can go too far in terms of defining play to a point where it loses some of its capacity to surprise. On the other hand, if players aren't really sure about the types of options open to them, (or one or two players are controlling a discussion), questionnaires offer a good way to give everyone a chance to have their voices heard and to contribute. A six page hand-out is, perhaps, taking player choice too far; but a page covering the setting as a whole and the types of challenges players wish to meet may be quite useful.

The same applies to meetings or chats aimed at campaign planning, where a sketch or framework can be helpful providing it doesn't drill down into too much detail.

FEEDBACK

Feedback, either between game sessions or during play, offers opportunities to fine-tune play. Highlighting and rewarding good play, commenting on ideas that made a game run well or letting the GM know that you want more of the same can all contribute to future sessions. Negative feedback, including comments which don't propose any alternatives, is likely to be less helpful and quite disruptive when used in-game.

PLAYER CHOICE

Most of the points raised above concern various approaches to increasing player choice. This isn't about letting players do entirely what they like, when they like. The GM is there to interpret the rules and to make play entertaining for players, so it's pretty essential to negotiate with, rather than against, the GM.

When players communicate with the GM it becomes much easier for the GM to design settings and scenarios to suit everyone at the table. Put another way, giving players more choice at the planning stage works well providing players' choices are more about adding options rather than excluding them.

SUPPORTING NEW PLAYERS

Regular RPG players will arrive at games with much of the following already in mind or easily put in place. However, new players may well have a very limited awareness of what they are actually going to get up to during play:

1. Players typically find it helpful to be clear of their roles in all activities. Class-based games help with this through outlining a primary role, e.g. in terms of a cluster of related combat or stealth capabilities. This can result in cardboard cut-out stereotypes, so new players may also benefit from a few words on filling out and individualizing characters on character sheets and at the table. Ambiguity of roles is often best avoided.
2. Players will find it easier to concentrate on play if they have been assigned their roles, and given relevant 'scripts'

or ‘models’, (e.g. actual plays), well in advance of the game.

3. To ensure a player is going to be comfortable with a role the player’s background or prior experience can be considered when assigning the role.
4. Players are likely to appreciate being given enough time for preparation.
5. Players should have some basic familiarity before roles are decided to allow players to be able to recognize the player behind the character – and as common courtesy.
6. Short, constructive feedback presented by the GM and players immediately after play is likely to be welcomed - providing it sticks to a ‘two stars and a wish’ approach, i.e. two definite positives and one area that might have gone differently. It can be useful if comments aim to feedforward into future sessions
7. The roleplaying activity needs be organized around players’ interests and readiness.
8. The number of players should be reasonably manageable.
9. Players tend to appreciate having a clear understanding of the criteria or rubrics for advancement and effective play inside the game they are playing, i.e. if the game rewards storytelling the players are going to want to know that.

SETTLING OUTCOMES

Younger players are sometimes unsure about using dice to settle outcomes. They may see ‘taking chances’ as getting in the way of imaginative play and also as surrendering player choice. It is

possible to make them more familiar with taking calculated risks by introducing a range of random factors through a selection of quick games.

These options can easily be introduced to and become part of play through in-game encounters. For example, an opponent may offer a PC the chance to resolve a disagreement or impasse by offering to settle the matter with a quick game of Jacks or Stone, Paper, Scissors.

SETTLING OUTCOMES TABLE

No.	Outcome	Variants
1	Card draws or coins for best of three	
2	Connect 4	
3	Roll 2D6 for the first double	
4	Indoor skittles	
5	Nerf guns	
6	Jacks	
7	Jenga	
8	Stone, Paper, Scissors	
9	Top Trumps	
10	Water guns	



PART 3: COLORFUL CHARACTERS

FLESHING OUT A PLAYER CHARACTER

An adventurer or PC can be a casual, sometimes short-lived, acquaintance – defined mainly by the skills set built-up during character generation and the default style of play for such a character within a rule set.

Alternatively a PC can have or build up a past; develop a place and a dynamic within the game-world; and form future prospects and shifting expectations. Many RPGs tend to try to deliver the impression of an authentic character background either with a fairly broad brush or by drilling down into sets and subsets of increasingly specific skills.

RPG Traveler is well-known for quickly stepping new characters through an eventful pre-game career. So a fairly streamlined, event-driven character generation can go a long way towards sketching out an individual, if not unique, character.

Nevertheless, there is nothing quite as authentic or unique as a character background built-up during gameplay. Whether or not a player wishes to start with a clean slate, a mere handful of adventures are usually sufficient to flesh-out a character's place in events and how the character fits into the game-world as a whole. For many players this can rapidly deliver a sense of ownership and investment in an adventurer's lifestream - aka the combination of actions, events, in-game relationships and campaign ties that snowball during play.

The content that follows does not attempt to replace a particular system's built-in character generation; but does suggest a range of informal options for varying, developing and/ or self-selecting character traits and backgrounds.

PRIOR EXPERIENCE

Making compelling PCs and NPCs is an essential RPG ingredient, as much of a game's action and intrigue is centered round PCs' interactions with NPCs.

There are a number of common ways of going about character generation:

1. Using a character class which outlines a profile of skills and abilities.
2. Spending an allocation of points on building a PC based on skills and abilities.
3. Guiding a character through a prior career or life story that accumulates skills and abilities.
4. Devising a background story/ character history.

Some or all of these elements may be combined and players sometimes have quite firm preferences, e.g. players who enjoy writing up a character history as compared to players who would rather start with a blank canvas and use the game and the PC's gameplay to form a compelling character during play.

There is no need for rules and/ or GMs to define which steps are involved, as it's really quite easy to accommodate character customization and personalization in many ways - providing the standard approach of not seeking to gain an unfair advantage is accepted round the table.

It's certainly well worth taking a little time to offer options, because players will be more engaged with their characters and, therefore, the game as a whole if they are able to feel that they have a sense of ownership over the characters they play.

So, if a player wants a background story or a slightly quirky character class – why not. The story behind, for example, the scar on a character's forehead, an embarrassing tattoo or a childhood spent on the run can only help to give characters and campaigns more texture and purchase.

Equally, GMs may wish to take a look at how practical it is to build-up information on NPCs. For example, recurring enemies, old comrades at arms and opponents with an eye for an escape route are worth developing as they can be used, and evolve, time and again.

It may seem time-consuming to expand on a game's character generation rules or to roll a PC through career history tables. Nevertheless, doing so turns cardboard-cutout stereotypes into authentic characters. These PCs are likely to have networks of relationships that can dovetail with events and campaign-wide challenges to constantly refuel RPG campaigns.

Some of the options available for adding detail to characters' backgrounds are set out below. The list is not exhaustive, but players and GMs may wish to identify and outline those that appeal to them before starting character generation.

The list is presented through three tables to make it easy to incorporate the basic ideas straight into play with balanced outcomes, i.e. a roll for Good Times is balanced out by a roll for Bad Times. This approach can be adjusted to allow players to choose their own level of risk by ordering outcomes by severity and allowing players to select how many dice to roll and then applying the same number to each table.

This should result in a sketchy, relatively uneventful background for those rolling fewer/ lower dice and a more dramatic story for those rolling across a range that can reach the highest scores, i.e. the most severe outcomes on each table.

HARD TIMES TABLE

D20	Background	Details
1	Battle Fatigue	
2	Battlefield Injury	
3	Betrayed	
4	Demoted	
5	Disease	
6	Embarrassing Tattoo	
7	Enslaved	

D20	Background	Details
8	Exiled	
9	Gambling Debt	
10	Imprisoned	
11	Indebted	
12	Injury	
13	Life/ Energy Drain	
14	Marooned	
15	Outlawed	
16	Press-Ganged	
17	Recurring Enemy	
18	Scar	
19	Vendetta	
20	Wanted	

LIFESTREAMS TABLE

D20	Background	Details
1	Accident	
2	Betrothed	
3	Bolt Hole	
4	Business Opportunity	
5	Expulsion	
6	Graduation	
7	Headquarters	
8	Inheritance	
9	Invasion	
10	Killing Time	

D20	Background	Details
11	Laid-Off	
12	Lease	
13	Legacy	
14	Narrow Escape	
15	Natural Disaster	
16	Practice	
17	Promoted	
18	Property	
19	Sanctuary	
20	Voyage	

GOOD TIMES TABLE

D20	Background	Details
1	Battlefield Promotion	
2	Battlemaster	
3	Benefactor	
4	Comrade-at-Arms	
5	Epic Party	
6	Hallowed Ground	
7	Heroism	
8	Last Stand	
9	Lucky Win	
10	Magical/ Digital Tattoo	
11	Magical/ Technology Item	
12	Mentored	
13	Minor Magical/ Technology Item	

D20	Background	Details
14	Miraculous Event	
15	Sponsor	
16	Sporting Triumph	
17	Tournament Win	
18	Tutored	
19	Valuable Item	
20	Victorious	

Of course, there is nothing to stop players from adding a further layer of detail/ personalization with sub-options under each heading. However, the tables shown above offer plenty to work with while leaving lots of room to float a story on top of any specific bonuses, or penalties, attached to each option.

Making a mini-game out of rolling on custom tables can appeal to players all the more if they're involved in customizing the tables' options and outcomes/ effects.

Using tables quickly puts more flesh on the bones of raw characters. However, for those who wish to go further or take a less random approach there are lots of factors that could contribute to a backstory.

CHARACTER BACKGROUNDS TABLE

Background	Details
Celebrations	
Childhood Experiences	
Childhood Memories	
Costume	
Dark Secrets	
Deeds	
Enemies	
Equipment	
Favorite Locations	
Flaws	
Friends and Enemies	
Holidays	
Locations	
Military Service	
Passions	
Pastimes	
Personality	
Pets and Companions	
Preferences and Pet Hates	
Physical Features	
Relationships	
Secret Missions	
Sidelines and Secrets	
Superstitions	
Traditions	

If GMs and players wish to turn this into a largely mechanical process it can be helpful to allow a certain number of ‘nudges’ where the player can select an option one place higher or lower on a table. Occasional ‘tilts’ where the player is allowed a re-roll may also help to arrive at a balance between random elements and a PC with characteristics a player is interested in play. The following table expands one type of background.

SIDELINES AND SECRETS

These kinds of detail are likely to be hidden or sleeper talents that may come to light during the course of play.

SIDELINES AND SECRETS TABLE

D20	Sideline or Secret	Details
1	Assassin	
2	Collector	
3	Conspirator	
4	Cultist	
5	Embedded Reporter	
6	Forger	
7	Gambler	
8	Gardener	
9	Hunter	
10	Murderer	
11	Pickpocket	
12	Revolutionary	
13	Secret Agent	

D20	Sideline or Secret	Details
14	Secret Police	
15	Secret Society	
16	Serial Killer	
17	Sleeper	
18	Veteran	
19	Warlock	
20	Witch	

Some players will want none of this, but for others it helps to make characters and gameplay more fully-realized. Whether or not the story or lifestream is randomized to various degrees through rules sets and/ or emphasizes a personal or group story is up for negotiation.

SKILLS

Negotiations and diplomacy are typical of areas of RPG gameplay where rushing to apply a dice roll to arrive at a fixed outcome can undermine the gameplay. It is, therefore, often best to hold back - and sometimes blur the line between players' skills and the skills or attributes their adventurers possess - until an event or situation invites a decisive dice roll.

Checks for success and failure may take account of a mix of characters' natural attributes, their learned skills and players' skills. The type of basic skills system outlined below demonstrates a

flexible approach that allows both PCs and NPCs to gain and use a wide variety of specializations.

The system shown is very straightforward and based on adding a skills system to Old School takes on Dungeons and Dragons. It serves to outline an approach to offering players the option of highly customized characters without applying skill checks to the point where the rules exclude the use of players' own skills.

For straightforward and obvious tasks no check is needed, e.g. chopping firewood or climbing a ladder. However, more difficult tasks, (including the specialist skills of some followers), may suit a skills check involving a quick chat over which modifiers might apply – followed by a GM's ruling.

When a roll is used success results from gaining a total of 20 or more on a D20 roll – and any additional modifiers the GM considers relevant.

A natural roll of 20 usually allows a successful attempt at using the skill at the baseline level required to succeed in tasks requiring professional or specialist expertise. Rolling a natural 1 usually results in an automatic fail.

The standard of work is expected to be professional in the same manner as a Ranger or a Fighter is a professional warrior. Skills can be tested close to the limit in attempts to achieve spectacular results – and there is no reason why skills could not be tested for miraculous results.

SPECIALIST SKILLS TABLE

Skill	Professional	Spectacular	Guide Price
Alchemist	Prepare acids and alkalis, or ready a potion for enchantment	Prepare a magic item for permanent enchantment or a material, such as glass	1,200gp/ month and a 1,000gp laboratory
Animal Trainer	Train pets or animal companions	Train monsters such as war elephants and Worgs	400gp/ month and cages
Archer	Fires bows quickly and accurately at short or medium range	Fires bows quickly and very accurately at short to long range	75gp/ month
Armorer	Produce good quality weapons and arm	Produce weapons suitable for enchantment	200gp/ month and a 200gp forge
Artisan	Produce saleable soft goods and furnishings	Produce luxury goods	75gp/ month and materials
Battle Triage	Stop an unconscious, wounded humanoid from losing blood while unconscious	Stop an unconscious, wounded monster from losing blood while unconscious	25gp/ month

Skill	Professional	Spectacular	Guide Price
Blacksmith	Produce good quality metalwork	Produce high quality metalwork	20gp/ month and a 200gp forge
Brigadier (1 for every 600)	Capable of conducting battlefield operations with command of up to 600	Capable of conducting battlefield operations with command of up to 6,000	Twenty times the cost for a soldier*
Captain (1 for every 60)	Command five squads of 10 soldiers and 2 sergeants in combat operations	Rally your troops and take temporary command of up to 600 troops	Six times the cost for a soldier*
Charioteer	Race chariots - and fire from chariots and wagons in battle	Control and fire from war elephants and similar moving platforms	120gp/ month and chariot with horses
Cook	Cook a fine meal for twenty guests	Prepare a lavish feast for up to 50 guests	30gp/ month or higher
Diplomat	Negotiate a regional political stalemate	Negotiate a compromise in a regional political crisis	1,500gp/ month and a 5,000gp entourage/ mission

Skill	Professional	Spectacular	Guide Price
Escapologist	Slowly untie a single knot or binding	Escape a single set of chains	Its own reward
Explorer	Outdoor navigation, survival, hunting, shelter and tracking	Outdoor navigation, survival, hunting, shelter and tracking in extreme conditions	60gp/ month or higher
Herald	Signal using flags, banners, beacons and smoke signals	Signal using codes, tattoos, wildlife and sign language	40gp/ month or higher
Interrogator	Use leverage to gain a confession or admission	Use persuasion to extract useful information/ secrets	150gp/ month or higher
Jeweler	Cut and set gems and jewels to +10% value	Cut and set gems and jewels to +20% value	400gp/ month or more
Lieutenant (1 for every 20)	Command two squads of 10 soldiers and 2 sergeants in combat operations	Rally your troops and take temporary command of up to 60 troops	Three times the cost for a soldier*
Merchant	Trade or value at a fair and accurate price over a local	Trade in luxury goods across borders, using	500gp/ month or more – and

Skill	Professional	Spectacular	Guide Price
	area	caravans, shipping or other forms of transport	transport
Miner	Dig and maintain safe mines and tunnels	Dig and maintain safe underground rooms and chambers	25gp/month or higher
Pioneer	Improvise basic defensive devices, traps and barricades	Construct substantial defensive positions and prepare battlegrounds	60gp/month or higher
Sage	Able to interpret sections of ancient texts and familiar with most magic items	Able to interpret ancient texts with some accuracy, advise on the construction of rare magic items and comment on most unique magic items	2,500gp/month and a 2,000gp library
Sailor	Operate the sails and steering of a boat or galley	Operate the sails and steering of an ocean going ship	12gp/month
Sergeant (1 for every 10)	Organize a squad of soldiers and fight with a variety	Raise squad morale and fight with any weapon	Three times the cost for a soldier*

Skill	Professional	Spectacular	Guide Price
	of weapons		
Servant (Domestic)	Carry-out duties effectively and gossip	Carry out duties effectively and avoid gossip or scandal	2gp/ month
Ship's Captain	Maritime command, navigation and sailing	Maritime command, navigation and sailing in stormy weather	350gp/ month and a ship
Siege Engineer	Design and build a siege catapult or short bridge	Design and build a trebuchet or similar device, organize mining operations or prepare a battlefield	1,200gp/ month and siege engine repairs and upgrades
Soldier	March and fight according to orders and with good morale. Use a limited range of weapons	Fight in formation, with solid morale and using a variety of weapons	2gp/ month in camp or castle*
Spy	Gather information about troop positions and meet contacts with local	Intercept messages and extract reliable information. Create a	25gp/ month and 500gp or more/ mission

Skill	Professional	Spectacular	Guide Price
	information	convincing disguise	
Steward	Oversee the operation of a castle or a similar stronghold	Oversee the operation of a royal court, a region or a city	400gp/ month
Torchbearer	Underworld navigation, open doors and entrances, and identify common and uncommon monsters	Underworld cartography, dismantle doors and entrances, and identify rare monsters	2gp/ day and basic equipment
Treasurer	Interpret local trading, currency and property rights and customs	Understand and negotiate local trading, currency and property rights	700gp/ month

* - Soldiers based in a secure castle or fortification cost 1gp/ month. On the march or at war the costs increase to 6gp/ month for infantry, 10gp/ month for archers and 20gp/ month for cavalry. Mercenaries cost twice as much and may cost significantly more if they are to stay loyal under difficult circumstances.

The cost of training from 1st level is twice as many XP for each extra level or + gained, i.e. 250XP, 500XP, 1,000XP, 2,000XP, 4,000XP, 8,000XP, 16,000XP, 32,000XP and 64,000XP to 10th Level. There is

no fixed limit to skill levels, but a roll of 1 typically remains an automatic fail when using a D20.

Players can gain skill levels using combinations of cash and XP. This can be done through building on their existing skills and by taking opportunities to practice their new skills. For example, a Fighter that regularly works at fixing armor or a Magic-User who cooks the party's meals every night.

These skills may be assumed to be present for characters working in/ with experience in practicing a skill as their 'day job' at +10, i.e. 10th Level. Players can seek XP through working on skills as their 'day job', but the pay/ XP will be low until they reach roughly 10th Level. At that stage a craftsperson or professional has a high basic chance of success - but this can be modified by a number of factors:

Skills roll calculations include:

1. Skill modifiers for levels gained in a skill.
2. Below 5th Level instructions can add +2 to rolls.
3. Below 5th Level help from a more skilled instructor adds +5 to rolls.
4. A match between the skill and an adventurer's class gives a +2 class bonus.
5. A matching ability score of 15+ gives a +2 ability bonus.

Deductions may also include:

6. Rushed work on tasks that take time and care alters rolls by -5.

- 7. Substandard materials or equipment reduces rolls by -5.
- 8. Trying for spectacular results alters rolls by -5.

This basic system uses what's known as an unopposed roll, which means there are no fixed factors such as an opponent's armor to check. Instead modifiers are applied on an *ad hoc* basis, i.e. striking a heavily armored, lethal opponent starts out as a spectacular task.

SKILLS TABLE

Skill	Level Bonus	Class Bonus +2	Ability Bonus +2	Rushed
Alchemist		Magic-User	Intelligence	-5
Animal Trainer		Ranger	Wisdom	-5
Archer		Thief	Dexterity	
Armorer		Fighters	Strength	-5
Artisan		Bard	Intelligence	-5
Battle Triage		Cleric	Wisdom	
Blacksmith		Fighters	Strength	-5
Brigadier		Fighters	Intelligence	
Captain		Fighters	Wisdom	
Charioteer		Thief	Dexterity	
Cook			Wisdom	-5
Diplomat		Bard	Charisma	-5
Escapologist		Thief	Dexterity	-5
Explorer		Ranger	Constitution	
Herald		Ranger	Intelligence	
Interrogator			Charisma	-5
Jeweler			Dexterity	-5

Skill	Level Bonus	Class Bonus +2	Ability Bonus +2	Rushed
Lieutenant		Fighters	Charisma	-5
Merchant			Charisma	-5
Miner			Constitution	-5
Pioneer		Thief	Dexterity	-5
Sage		Magic-User	Intelligence	-5
Sailor			Constitution	-5
Sergeant		Fighters	Constitution	
Servant			Charisma	-5
Ship's Captain			Wisdom	
Siege Engineer		Fighters	Intelligence	-5
Soldier		Fighters	Strength	
Spy		Monk	Intelligence	-5
Steward		Bard	Wisdom	
Torchbearer		Fighter	Strength	
Treasurer			Intelligence	-5

Clearly, the class-based elements can be adapted or stripped away to provide the basic game engine required to run most RPGs.

NOMINATE A SKILL

There is no reason why a player can't nominate other specializations - so long as these don't eclipse any overlapping skills or abilities. For example, if a player wished to learn to prospect for gold and gems the GM and the other players could discuss the types

of ‘professional’ and ‘spectacular’ outcomes that might be linked to the new skill.

PLAYING TO WIN?

In many videogames, most wargames and the majority of boardgames playing successfully is defined by the rules as playing to become the sole winner or king of the castle. That’s a fairly narrow definition of success, which breaks down if a player uses rules knowledge to win, e.g. the adult who bludgeons a kid at the Monopoly table, because the kid doesn’t know the most effective tactics.

RPGs simply don’t work like that and gameplay that claims to be RPG-based while promoting a simplistic win-mentality disconnects players from long term motivations, fully-developed characters and becoming caught up in storybuilding.

RPGs work more like free running, where ‘winning’ is about pushing your own limits, sharing ideas and having a laugh. In other words, open-ended RPG gameplay focused on player choice is not so much about winning, as about winning in style.

There are plenty of suggestions on running gameplay spread through the text, but these key points may be helpful for new players:

1. If your character isn't in the same place as the action you're not able to pitch in – unless magic or technology helps out.
2. Equip your characters with the attributes to operate as an adventurer, i.e. give them enough intelligence to be able to survive as an adventurer.
3. Trust your GM to balance play. A few bad calls by the GM are not a deal-breaker and a poor GM can show you what to look for in other GMs and/ or what to avoid as a GM.
4. Play off the other players, i.e. if someone comes up with an interesting idea help them to run with it.
5. Build your own story and feed the events in that story into your character.
6. Don't be too quick to kill off a worthy opponent. The next one may not be quite so interesting.
7. Connect to the people, places and events your PCs encounter. Have them buy a property, go home for Midwinter every year, bump into an old flame at an awkward moment, . . .
8. The GM is a player too and the easiest way to avoid a railroad is to set out options and boundaries before a campaign starts.
9. You're a 14th level Paladin/ Assassin multi-class Half-Orc with a +3 Frostbrand – it might be hard, but you can still try to share the limelight.

PETS AND ANIMAL COMPANIONS

Pets and animal companions play a part in many tabletop RPGs. The most common animal companion has probably always been the trusty mule, which serves as an inexpensive option for transporting large amounts of gold out of dungeons. War hounds are another familiar choice, as they can do a lot to increase the chances of survival for a party of new PCs.

Clearly these very practical pets or companions can be of considerable immediate value to players. Otherwise, interest often ends as players find more convenient ways to move goods around or stay alive. This seems an inevitable process, because players prefer to concentrate on roleplaying their character and any hirelings rather than paying attention to animals which can't progress in the game.

The generally low use or lowly status of pets at mid- to high levels of RPG play is hardly a problem, as there's more than enough going on to keep players busy. In addition, it's also often simpler all round to lend a party a flight of griffins to take them on a journey instead of presenting them with a litter to stable, raise and train.

At the same time it seems worth keeping pets and companions around as an option, because they can become as central to a character as a character class or a comrade-in-arms. For example, pets can be very helpful when it comes to encouraging kids to take part in basic, story-focused RPG play. This is in part because kids generally like pets, but also because GMs can use a pet to prompt

younger players without repeated direct interventions from the GM.

Pets or companions can have even more to offer if kids or young adults are playing in any kind of school, apprenticeship or college type scenarios. For instance, the competitions, rivalries, wizardry and aerial combat training that might be found in a school for PCs learning to ride dragons is one obvious way to upstage Harry Potter's broomsticks and griffins.

There's no need to introduce a raft of new rules to start making more use of pets, as most RPGs have basic rules for the speed and range of a wide variety of creatures. If a particular player's preferred pet or companion isn't among them, just look for the nearest equivalent and base your version on that.

Special powers, such as a chameleon's tongue or a dragon's breath needn't be problematic, as few players can argue for a companion that gives an overwhelming advantage compared to other characters' options. Equally, if everyone wants a powerful dragon it's going to be pretty obvious that it's necessary to either limit the dragons' power or scale-up the opposition. Pets which can easily be given abilities and/ or training include:

PETS AND COMPANIONS TABLE

No.	Pet or Companion	Details
1	Birds of Prey	
2	Chameleons	

No.	Pet or Companion	Details
3	Dolphins	
4	Dragonflies	
5	Giant Spiders	
6	Hunting Dogs	
7	Magpies	
8	Timber Wolves	
9	War Hounds	
10	Watch Dragons	
11	Wildcats	
12	Wolves	

Advancement is the commonest way to turn PCs' abilities into a series of steps and the same technique works well with most pets and companions. A chameleon might be particularly good at concealment and collecting items, but only able to learn a few simple commands. Alternatively, a wildcat might be trained to follow several commands, while remaining prone to cutting loose and savaging other peoples' pets or livestock. Key commands which players might try to teach to most pets probably include the following:

TRAINING PETS AND COMPANIONS TABLE

No.	Command	Details
1	Attack	
2	Call	
3	Fetch	
4	Follow	

No.	Command	Details
5	Hide	
6	Hunt	
7	Leap	
8	Search	
9	Stay Away	
10	Stay Put	

More complex creatures like a dragon or an intelligent familiar are harder to limit. Equally, a pinch of magic dust might be needed to explain how a dragonfly could manage to learn commands. Nevertheless, with a bit of negotiation players can usually end up with an amusing and, at times, useful companion; without GMs having to reshape the overall balance of play.

For younger players it's quite easy to trade durability for special powers. This suits everyone, as neither the GM nor the players want the pets to come to any harm. Older, more cynical players can be more pragmatic and it's probably necessary to offer a relatively useful and bright companion if you want to avoid watching a succession of pets being fed into traps.

Niche pets can be particularly useful if players are seeking a reasonable advantage, as a hawk capable of mapping out wildlife across a wilderness through the prey it returns is spider bait in an underground tomb. A mighty war elephant stacked with war drums and archers offers a similar option. The expense could be justified by the animal's value when exploring jungle or scrub land

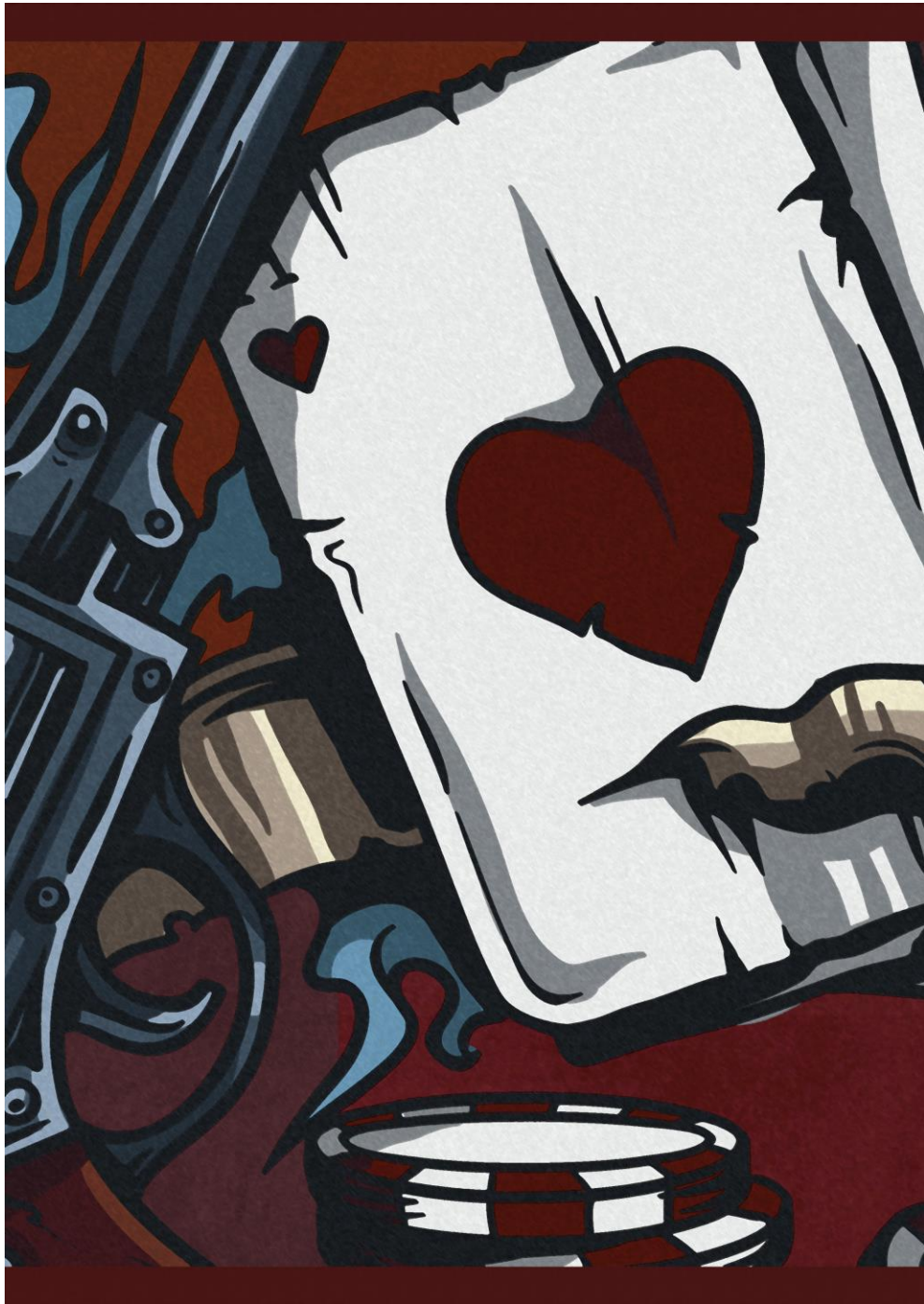
wildernesses, but you're not going to want to march it across a swamp.

Pets are no more a requirement than any other RPG option. However, they can be especially useful for young players and groups of players without enough numbers. They also lend adventures and campaigns an extra layer of familiarity and authenticity. With that in mind the following selection of rare transport options might be found in any major fantasy city's animal bazaar. Clearly, rare creatures with valuable skills would be expensive to buy and keep, so rental might often be the best option:

RARE CREATURES TABLE

No.	Creature	Details
1	Chariot Horses	Chariots for 2 or 4, with optional scything blades.
2	Dragons	Legal restrictions on using breath weapons and claws.
3	Griffins	Fast, fierce and hard to tame.
4	Hippogriff	Fast but limited to carrying a single passenger.
5	Mammoths	Slow, steady and able to carry large weights.
6	Nightmares	Fast and impressive, but very demanding.
7	Pegasi	Offer speed and maneuverability.
8	Spiders, Giant	Brave, agile and temperamental.
9	Unicorns	Offer speed, loyalty and, possibly, magical powers.
10	War Elephants	Slow but almost unstoppable with armor on.

No.	Creature	Details
11	War Horses	Fast, resilient and capable of trampling opponents.



PART 4: RUNNING PLAY

READY~TO~RUN ADVENTURES

The RPG Handbook goes on to look in detail at the steps involved in designing your own adventures and campaigns. This homebrew approach can, however, seem a daunting task for a new GM and it's helpful to have a few ready-made examples to look over before getting started.

In addition, it is often useful for any GM to have some decent, good-to-go adventures on hand when simply too busy to prepare anything and too tired to run a largely improvisational game.

After half-a-dozen attempts at setting-up their own adventures few GMs will look back as – unsurprisingly - the fun and freedom involved in shaping your own worlds is generally more rewarding than acting as a milk monitor overseeing someone else's rules and plot lines.

This is in part because designing and co-designing adventures and campaigns can shift RPG gameplay away from sticking to the largely fixed narratives involved in passively playing through others' imaginative content.

Without this shift player-focused, imaginative storybuilding remains shackled to the original designers' landscapes, societies, characters and stories.

Does that suggest almost all shrink-wrapped scenarios and campaigns should be set aside? Not really as GMs and players' imaginative input needs to be fuelled by new ideas and inspiration. As a result, most homebrew GMs become magpies – frequently looking for new angles and variants to breathe life into their homebrew worlds.

Players may also be more than happy to take on board a brand, theme or narrative that appeals to them as a platform on which to build the rest of play. This can save time and helps to lead to the conclusion that less good quality, ready-made adventures and campaigns doesn't necessarily lead to more homebrewed gameplay.

Instead a steady shift in emphasis or balance is more likely to encourage GMs to homebrew. For example, a GM could start by changing a few items and monsters inside a shrink-wrapped adventure. The same GM might then take a basic dungeon adventure that's easy to beef-up and try adding a couple of extra plot hooks, some new traps and a handful of dynamic events, e.g. another party of adventurers in the same dungeon or deforming the dungeon when, for instance, a large explosion brings the levels above down into the gap formed by the blast.

The following short selection of scenarios present examples of some of the options players may wish to check out if they're thinking of trying out as a GM:

1. Dyson's Delve is a well-presented, free dungeon-crawl that could easily be developed to include NPC details and basic plotting.
2. The Classic Dungeons and Dragons page at Dragonsfoot has a selection of free D&D scenarios available as PDFs.
3. Mongoose Publishing make available two free Traveler campaigns – Secrets of the Ancients and The Pirates of Drinax.
4. Thistle Games' website has a multi-system scenario called Dragons' Rage available online.

There are many other free scenarios available on the Net, but the style and quality of them can vary greatly. Those shown present basic examples of some of the types of adventures players can easily build for themselves as starting points for their own designs.

More recent adventures and campaigns are much more likely to involve societies with an ecology and a pattern of ongoing events. I.e. the characters are embedded within a culture that probably includes earning a living, getting caught-up in the events around them and having birthday parties.

It is well worth trying to run some straightforward, standalone dungeon and village adventures before trying to scale up to cities and nations. Approaches to designing and co-designing living dungeons/ worlds are discussed again later in the text.

GAMESMASTER (GM) SKILLS

There is no one way to GM and no right way to GM. There are, however, some helpful approaches to running games which crop up time and again in RPG blogs, forums and magazines. Experienced GMs may well find nothing new in this section, but new GMs will come across options that have been tried and tested by many GMs over many campaigns.

PACING

Pacing is one of the first areas a new GM may wish to look at, because adjusting the pace of events in a game can build tension, make play less predictable, allow rest and recuperation, open-up sub-plots and/ or up the tempo both in-game and out-game.

One of the easiest ways to adjust pacing is through encounter selection. The type of encounters players are presented with, and the order in which they come across them, operate much like a throttle. Combat encounters, NPC encounters and PC conflicts tend to open the 'throttle', as player interactions come thick and fast because PCs are dealing with what's in front of them at the time.

Challenge-focused encounters, PC meetings, tricks and traps, urban encounters, and more, can be delivered at pace, but players are often being asked to take a step back from the 'here and now' to consider solutions and future options. Under these circumstances players deserve time to weigh up and co-ordinate their options.

Offering a good selection of different types of encounters and challenges within an adventure or a campaign setting can build pacing into settings and scenarios at the design stage. This is easily done without compromising player choice by signposting challenges and plots that players have previously identified, (by word or action), as contributing to enjoyable gameplay.

In other words, if players enjoy exploration and discovery point them in the direction of a ship and give them a map to ‘the Wilderness’, ‘The Savage Lands’ or the ‘Endless Ocean’. Then encourage them to head straight off into the unknown. The game’s pace will then be dictated by and open to manipulation through exploration, hazards, discovery, encounters and combat; rather than the relentless grind of the combat encounter.

Alternatively, re-mixing combat encounters to streamline cumbersome rules, to allow a greater degree of combat choreography, (including pacing), and to present a greater range of hazards can make combat-focused play much more variable.

CHANGE

Authentic gameplay involves game-worlds that change over time and react to events. This is most obvious when PCs return to an area months or years after their last visit. There will probably be new seasons, and a seasonal climate, NPCs that have aged and ‘moved on’, projects that were underway which have now reached completion and such like. In addition, a new regime may be in place, the area might have undergone sweeping change and attitudes towards the PCs may have altered while they’ve been away.

The manner in which events seem to progress or move forward is part of recognizing change. However, stagnation and deterioration are just as much a part of taking account of ongoing events. The collapse of buildings over time, a failure to patrol border lands adequately or the destruction of a city's water supply can all suggest different types of deformation within a game-world.

Substantial or global changes tend to overshadow and impact on local conditions and events. Nevertheless, the smallest event can trigger all sorts of different outcomes and it is just as valuable to incorporate change on a local level as across a whole campaign setting. A fort which the players left ruined just days before may have been reinforced, reconstructed and set on alert when players want to take the same route home.

Along similar, but more destructive, lines the effects of using high impact magical forces within a dungeon are likely to become significant. Shattered glass or broken doors might be all that needs to be recalled. On the other hand, tunnels may start to collapse, rocks may become dislodged and crumbling walls could turn single chambers into a huge gallery. Burst containers and out of control industrial processes may then present as particular threats or unleash and/ or re-define threats which were previously of little concern.

EASY COME, EASY GO

Many new players will set off with the intention/ belief that their PC will somehow become better/ more interesting/ capable of bossing the game by pursuing every magical or advanced

technological device out there. However, simply possessing an item or a device can easily unbalance a character, because the characters' material possessions start to eclipse the character's other attributes, including the lifestream of adventures, events, contacts and highlights that fuel the development of fully-realized player characters.

At the same time there's a lot to be said for giving PCs access to wealth and devices that can help them to meet and to develop the challenges they encounter. In addition, when linked to challenges, rather than individual PCs, such devices can drive plots, offer tempting prizes and engage players in moments of discovery.

The most straightforward approaches to achieving a balance involve devices that are limited or expended in some way, i.e. they only operate under certain conditions, they have charges or doses and/or they become obsolete after serving a purpose.

These methods work well, as the availability of devices can be linked to the needs of the PCs within an adventure or a campaign instead of the imagined need to have an all-powerful PC.

Dealing with cash calls for slightly different methods, as PCs can accumulate great wealth, which may then be used to help PCs to become what appears on the surface to be better/ more interesting/ capable of bossing the game. Some players and groups may not follow this line, but it's best to be prepared with a few options. For example, offer to sell PCs expensive items that help with challenges, charge taxes and tolls, and provide access to luxury goods that are

only likely to be used occasionally/ kept at home. Taking account of wear and tear, accidents and mishaps or damage to items during combat are other options which soon part a PC from her/ his gold.

If all else fails, it's possible to use events within the gameplay to remove cash from a game's economy, e.g. warfare might involve devaluations, revolution and even currency consuming magical or engineered viruses.

As in the real world, faster transport, luxury entertainment, elaborate protection and collecting information about your adversaries are areas where PCs, if not players, often pay out. Simply ask the PCs whether they wish to travel by cart or speed along in a designer chariot – then show them some of the optional extras that come with the better chariot. Will they care that much of the adventure that follows takes place in a swamp requiring them to park any chariots? Probably not, as the chariot waits ready to take them to other locations. (Unless, of course, they left a chariot with wooden parts next to an uninvestigated termite mound – which might call for new wheels if nothing else).

LISTEN UP

It takes time and encouragement for new RPG players to 'find their voice'. GMs can help such players to start taking more of a lead, to begin suggesting gameplay options and to think in terms of working as a team by making space for new players' voices. Straightforward approaches to this include:

Giving players time to outline their experience of events as they happen, (e.g. a player describing what the player's PC buys in a clothes or weapons store).

Supporting the challenges your players and you prefer, (e.g. players interested in investigation and deduction during play will find it hard to develop 'a voice' within combative adventures which aren't in tune with their gameplay expectations).

LOOSEN UP

Even the most skilled GM can't keep an eye on all of the possible actions and interactions likely to occur in any given adventure. About the best anyone can hope for is to stick to the key strengths that are known to work within a particular group. Help is available through scenario and settings design geared towards supporting players' imaginative thinking - and freeing-up GMs to focus on the game as a whole.

However, the easiest ways to take a lot of the pressure off are to negotiate a few compromises at the table, build as close a match as possible between player choice and the features of your game; and, effectively, allow yourself some basic errors.

FORCED-FEEDING

If there's a mismatch between the challenges a GM presents, (and all the locations, plots, sub-plots, NPCs, items and more which follow from there), and the challenges players regard as building enjoyable gameplay, there's little to be gained from force-feeding players your own preferences/ whatever comes to hand.

You may be able to cobble together a game without agreeing shared approaches to your game's challenges, but the gameplay will rattle along like a wagon with a broken axle. I.e. each 'wheel' will end up pulling away in different directions as each player forms a different take on the game.

GMs can drag everything forward through sheer willpower and enthusiasm, but the game is unlikely to gel. Under these conditions the GM may be tempted to fall back on cheap thrills, aka the lowest common combat denominator, to try to compel players to persist. At its worst this involves sending players into encounters which they can't avoid, despite them previously making it fairly obvious those particular types of encounters don't offer the challenges the players want to take on.

NO POST-MORTEMES

Feedback from comments made at the table, noticing when players are enjoying particular types of play and reflecting after the game are all likely to help to get a better match between the gameplay and players' hopes for the gameplay. However, that does not extend to recriminations over details, showdowns over inconsistencies in the rules and extensive post-mortems about what went wrong.

PLAYER DYNAMICS

Some players get on, others don't. It's not up to a GM to mediate between warring parties, but there's a lot to be said for taking opportunities to blend contrasting or opposing styles during play. On an obvious level, a player's knight may show contempt for another player's thief - right up to the point when the thief steps out of the shadows and saves the warrior.

STRAITJACKETING

Roughing out a PC for a new player to get play started quickly is often a major timesaver if everyone else is good to go. The tricky part is remembering to make the ready-rolled PC appeal to most new players without coming across as a cardboard cut-out.

It's important to give players the chance to invest in their PCs by personalizing and customizing them, which means taking the time to either offer a selection of start-up characters or to return to the PC design stage with the new player at the earliest opportunity.

If a GM starts handing down PCs and defining PCs for their players on a regular basis, a significant part of the players' investment in their PCs is gone. This loss of engagement can be worsened by systems which already pre-define PCs through strict character classes and exclusive skill paths, as there's not a lot left for a player to construct when the rules, the GM, the setting and the challenges a particular class can deal with are all in place.

In addition, the player can hardly go on to shape the destiny of a PC towards their own model or characterization if the 'die have been cast' before the player even picked up the character sheet.

METAGAMING

Striking a balance between allowing players to apply their own skills to play and maintaining both characterization and authenticity during play is easier to handle in-game if a few basic agreements have been reached beforehand.

Clearly, if a PC is held in a distant location and sealed off from communicating with other PCs there's going to be a breakdown in shared expectations and any sense of authenticity if the imprisoned character starts suggesting how other characters might act.

On the other hand, presenting PCs with a puzzle the players could solve, only to declare that none of the characters is sufficiently intelligent to understand the puzzle, dispenses with a gameplay option that some players may enjoy and might have requested.

More often than not grumbling on this point is down to players looking to optimize by neglecting soft skills like intelligence when making a PC and then assuming, or expecting, the player's skills/intelligence to fill any gaps. Many new players won't even realize that this falls into the category of seeking an unfair advantage. So, unless a player actually wishes to play a character that is going to struggle to plan or puzzle, the simple solution is for PCs to pay up enough for an at least average intelligence.

Skills checks are frequently used to define characters' class and combat skills and they can be extended to mechanize countless other areas of gameplay. However, it doesn't take long to reach a point where skills creep becomes counterproductive. Players need room to maneuver in terms of look for novel solutions in situations as they unfold. Without engaging player skill in this way the distance between the player and the character gets in the way of the sense of ownership and individuality that becomes attached to a much-loved character.

Instead, a randomly generated character playing with options and solutions defined by the rules becomes a representative of the game rather than an avatar focused on the player's interest and RPG gameplay.

If it player doesn't feel able to trust a GM to exercise the required balance there probably isn't much of a basis for an enjoyable game anyway, which it is probably better to know at the outset.

MONSTERS HAVE BRAINS

Monsters and other NPCs who follow entirely predictable routines don't present much of a threat and usually require some sort of added ingredient, such as a trap or difficult terrain, to make them more interesting to play against. Allowing monsters to use their instincts and intelligence to vary their actions makes play more authentic and gritty.

Contrary to some popular belief, it is possible for monsters to run away, to plan an escape route or to fall upon their knees begging for mercy instead of always fighting to the death.

SETTING EVENTS IN MOTION

Providing a living, breathing game-world which feels both fantastic and credible is hard work. Building from scratch is particularly time-consuming, while adapting shrink-wrapped game content invites a certain amount of compromise.

Using real world events to add detail, atmosphere and a sense of setting a campaign in motion cut back on the time required to prepare well and the compromises involved in working from one

size fits all materials. Landscapes, architectures, legends, maps and calendars are easily borrowed and adapted from readily available Internet sources. These can be combined and re-mixed to sketch out settings and scenarios at speed and with authenticity.

With limited Internet research a wide selection of recurring events, larger than life characters, epic landscapes and awesome architecture can be mapped out in minutes or hours rather than weeks or months.

SIDELINING

From the point of view of players they are only fully ‘in play’ when sharing in the action and decisions at the table. Every time there’s a pause to check a player’s rules query the rest of the players are sidelined. The same applies when one PC regularly grabs the narrative limelight, when a PC is significantly more powerful than the rest of the party, when props hinder rather than help, and when solutions to challenges have to be rules-based.

Some sidelining can be useful, e.g. when a quick rules query helps out or someone goes to fetch the snacks. However, it will be harder for PCs to act as a team and some players are going to feel sidelined unless the GM is aware of sidelining and, where necessary, ready to use prompts to balance players’ access to the gameplay.

MAPPING AND CARTOGRAPHY

RPGs don’t always need maps, as there are RPGs which use very straight-forward zonal movement and storytelling games that make

no use at all of tabletop layouts. Nevertheless, a majority of games will benefit from mapping

Four options for carrying out mapping are set out below. Each option has some advantages.

1. Leave mapping to the players and let the PCs get lost if the maps aren't accurate. This is well-suited to dungeon adventures, where a certain amount of disorientation may add to the fun - now and again.
2. The GM presents players with maps to save time and speed play along. These maps can be left largely free of features, which will be added as adventurers explore. They are well-suited for showing overviews of regions, cities and landscapes – but may well give players information ahead of time when used in dungeons.
3. GMs can use treasure maps and access to architectural blueprints to form a mixed approach, i.e. the GM maps some areas and then switches mapping back to the PCs for other areas.
4. Shared mapmaking combines GM and player-led approaches and doesn't have to involve switching methods constantly. By working on large sheets of paper, (or a digital equivalent), GMs and players can use marker pens/colored pencils, (or a digital equivalent), to build a map as play unfolds. When players enter a room the GM adds obvious features, but further contributions only get added, by the GM or the players, when play zooms in on particular areas in more detail, e.g. a table with plates

spread over it can be seen from the entrance to a room, but the food on the plates and the silver cutlery only get added if PCs explore in greater detail.

A mix of these approaches can help to vary the presentation of a game. For example, colorful, professionally made regional maps might be used along with encouraging players to participate in marking local maps and/ or ongoing situations.

Getting players involved in marking or doodling on to a shared map is an excellent way:

1. To keep players occupied while others are taking their turn.
2. To keep players' attention focused on the action.
3. To offer a 'control panel' that tracks the situations players are dealing with.
4. To review what has already happened and what is going on elsewhere.

Another advantage of getting everyone round the table used to mapping features and some details of ongoing gameplay are the records/ memento/ artwork left at the end. A mix of cavern or room outlines, physical features, monsters' positions, damage done, actions and doodles or sketches makes for an entertaining summary. This adventure or campaign record can then be used to review how a campaign went or to quickly give new players a clear idea of the kind of gameplay to expect within your group.

For rooms and caverns it's already very easy to use a cheap 10" tablet, a free copy of touch Autosketch on Android and a standard PC monitor to pass floor plans round, annotate or sketch on them and then rapidly send the results to the monitor via a service like Facebook or Posterous.

Amongst other positive effects the results of this approach include more multi-sensory gameplay, more participative gameplay and blending in-game fun alongside meta-game fun, e.g. having a laugh at players' first attempts at touch sketching.

The types of maps available to players fall into a number of categories. When deciding which to use it's often worth considering how much variety to trade off against consistent styling. Options include:

1. Sketching maps quickly with little concern for how things look. This works extremely well, as quick, dynamic maps will end up representing events as they happen.
2. Using topographical maps to save time and to put ideas across quickly, i.e. they're good for instant dungeon layouts, communications networks and rough cross-sections.
3. Making hand-drawn maps, which means taking a little time and care with the line-work. With practice these will often start to appear in place of early doodles and sketches.
4. Digital mapping that involves turning drawings into digital images or designing maps entirely on computers. There's a lot to be said for a digital workflow, as it makes it much

easier to clone and vary work you've already done. For some cartographers further options open up, such as wrapping a map round a globe. Specialist software such as Campaign Cartographer can be used for those who want a dedicated solution. Painting software like Photoshop or GIMP; drawing software like Illustrator, Inkscape or CorelDraw; and 3D software - including SketchUp - tend to reward time spent learning to use the software/building-up libraries of re-useable objects.

5. Using infographics to present information to players might involve anything from a fancy menu to the charts and logs found in a starship. There are countless data visualization sites on the Net to help out, but pen and paper can produce quick and effective results on the spot.

PROMPTS AND INTERRUPTS

Much of a GM's contribution to RPGs involves serving-up short descriptions and narrative options that spur players' imaginations and present choices. As part of that process most GMs offer a certain amount of prompting to help players to explore the options open to their PCs.

For experienced players prompting may be limited to a few subtle clues and hints offered up through the characters and situations presented by the GM. That's ideal for experienced players who will easily, and almost automatically, consider all of the information and options available to their own PC and the party as a whole. However, new and/ or younger players are often going to be

unaware of the full range of choices open to them and how to go about selecting the best options.

Gamesmasters can help players to gain experience and to enjoy play by offering a wide variety of prompts either directly to players or through their PCs. The idea is not to advise or instruct players in how to run their characters, but to present information in ways that help new players to get as much out of the game as experienced players.

Prompts can also be used to interrupt play. For example, if a player is hogging the limelight - or going for an Oscar - it can be helpful to prompt them to move along. Equally, a player that's lurking on the edge of the game can be encouraged to participate with as little as a reference to the character class or skills their character is using.

Experienced GMs will already be experts at calling upon many of the possible prompts shown below. However, some GMs may find it helpful to become more familiar with a wide range of prompts. Most of the options under discussion are about either re-framing or varying the presentation of the information to help players to coming up with their own ideas and solutions.

PLAYER CHOICE

One of the most helpful ways to prompt players is to discuss and negotiate how the GM and players wish to play the game before a campaign or adventure starts. This doesn't need to involve specific or detailed planning, but it does allow players to feed into the prompts served-up by the GM during play.

REPHRASING

It's quite easy for an experienced GM or player to explain play or the rules in terms which are quite hard to understand. For example, 'roll 2D4' means little to most of the general population.

REVISED PRESENTATION

If the information presented to players results in blank expressions and requests for a better explanation it is often useful to either simplify or re-frame the way the information is being put across. For example, breaking information down into key steps or using a diagram instead of the spoken word generally helps.

REVIEWING SKILLS

Reminding a player about a PC's abilities and skills can encourage players to reconsider the options open to them in terms of making best use of what a PC has to offer.

REVIEWING PCS' MOTIVES

GMs can help players and their PCs to focus by asking them to consider how a situation contributes to the characterization and long-term goals players have set their PCs. Placing a character's current situation in the wider context of a campaign, quest or lifetime may also motivate players to persist.

SNAPSHOTS

Reviewing ongoing events within an encounter by listing what PCs are dealing with is a quick way of encouraging players to consider their characters' options.

REMINDERS

Simply reminding players of a clue, event or insight learned earlier in a series of adventures or encounters may shine a light on information that players already have, but aren't considering while caught up in current actions and events.

REVIEWING OPTIONS

For new players it's often quite important to prompt them by running through choices that offer solutions. For example, a new player may not realize that using a magical missile to release a catch or lever, which drops or pours a liquid over opponents, is a good alternative to simply firing a missile at a single opponent.

EXPLORING OPTIONS

Experienced players may not need or appreciate prompting under most circumstances. However, it's usually possible to encourage them to look around or zoom in by hinting at alternatives. For instance, a GM might simply say, 'that's an option but there are others'. The player is thereby given a 'stick or twist' choice, but not aided in identifying or selecting the best options.

RECONNECTING

Taking players back to a situation which sheds some light on a current predicament or challenge offers an unobtrusive approach to prompting. This might involve suggesting that player characters have faced similar problems before and managed to find a way out on those occasions. This type of prompt is similar to a reminder, but players are being left to make their own connection to past encounters and events.

Overall, prompting is about building an awareness of options and moving away from leaving fixed rules and GMs' personal expectations to shape play. With prompting less is definitely more in terms of stepping away from directing players and encouraging them to improvise. However, without prompting new and novice players are going to find it hard to bridge a skills gap that limits their gameplay by restricting the range of options open to them during play.

HACK AND SLAY OR REMIX AND PLAY

A full range of RPG gameplay options can include stealth, investigation, mystery, construction, characterization, planning, intrigue and all manner of ongoing challenges, missions and quests. These options, (and the list is far from exhaustive), open up opportunities for a wide variety of open-ended tabletop roleplaying and design gaming. At the same time, sooner or later, even the most plot or challenge-focused adventures are likely to involve direct confrontation.

There are plenty of ways to roleplay conflict, but players and/ or plot will often call for raised shields and a handy Longsword. The standard approach to varying RPG combat is through the many abilities of monsters, aliens and other lifeforms. However, the novelty wears off as soon as players become familiar with their own and most of the monsters' abilities.

From there on combat can become predictable as the gameplay concentrates on matching players' abilities to each monster's weaknesses. Some RPGs end up trying to introduce greater excitement, if not variety, by making the PCs and their opponents as closely matched as possible. This adds risk, but can make players feel they're under the cosh. Which risks getting sucked into heated debates about the rules, as outcomes, (on many levels), may hang on interpreting a single clause within the rule set.

Adding a dramatic backdrop in terms of a combat's place in the plot or some novel circumstances offers a partial solution, as PCs' motivations, (and meaningful in-game consequences), can add tension and give a combat a wider resonance across the rest of the gameplay.

Fighting over different prizes, possessions and passions may vary the meaning of a combat within the game as a whole, but it seems necessary to go further to make the most of what combat can contribute to play. In particular, it seems worthwhile to go beyond the limits of static rules sets.

Rule sets usually take account of a selection of basic options, including fighting while wading, fighting on horseback or fighting in the dark. This can be extended in countless directions.

COMBAT OPTIONS TABLE

No.	Fighting . . .	Details
1	Amidst lava streams	
2	At sea	

No.	Fighting . . .	Details
3	In a swamp	
4	In a tar pit	
5	In battle	
6	In explosive/ destructive locations	
7	In labyrinths	
8	In quicksand	
9	On ice	
10	Over bridges and chasms	
11	Underwater	
12	While ill or poisoned	

These, and many more choices, can be varied again by deformation of the terrain and/ or events, i.e. conditions may deteriorate, (or emerge), as things ‘fall apart’. Modern and SciFi settings are all the better, with an endless array of readily available environmental hazards to choose from, ranging from planetary conditions to invasive nano-bots.

The choice of combat variants available to players is clearly far beyond knowing the difference between a Storm Giant and a Stone Giant. Except there’s a problem: how can even the largest rule sets provide combat mechanics for handling each and every possible situation? Fortunately, there appear to be a few possible approaches which might help:

1. Consider what the existing rules have to offer and what might be added in terms of simple combat modifiers that don't unbalance play.
2. Extend the rules to provide fuller consideration of the situation and to add tables to vary possible effects. Modifying magical or physical effects to suit the environment might well add authenticity.
3. Take account of knock-on effects and ongoing events, including deformation and the emergent properties of the situation.
4. Populate the combat zone with environmental combat options, e.g. items, physical features and other 'solutions', available to the observant and opportunist without highly specialized skills.
5. Use story-focused fighting and freeform rulings to take account of new conditions as they emerge during play. This is a tiring option, but it does allow the rules to move with the territory and seamlessly fade into the background. That can, in turn, bring the plot and players' characterization into the foreground.

Overall, combat can deliver some of the most exciting gameplay available in videogame RPGs, tabletop RPGs and design games. There's not that much a player can do about videogame combat. You get the combat and combat settings which come in the box. More opened-ended, imaginative tabletop games can do better, as GMs and players are able to vary, shape and remix the design and gameplay of combat encounters to much greater imaginative effect.

MIXED MESSAGES

There are a great variety of codes, messages, secret codes, warning signs and similar communications which can be used to make information available to players in varied and original ways. These are some of the options open to GMs and players during play:

D100	Medium	Variants
1	Alchemical Transformations	
2	Architecture	
3	Astrolabs and Astroclocks	
4	Beacons	
5	Candles	
6	Color	
7	Cosmetics	
8	Costumes	
9	Expressions	
10	Fireworks	
11	Flags and Banners	
12	Flowers	
13	Gestures	
14	Hairstyles	
15	Hand Signals	
16	Headwear	
17	Inks	
18	Invisible Ink	

D100	Medium	Variants
19	Jewelry and Accessories	
20	Kites	
21	Knots	
22	Labyrinths	
23	Lanterns and Lenses	
24	Lighthouses	
25	Maps	
26	Masks	
27	Mazes	
28	Missiles	
29	Mosaics	
30	Playing Cards	
31	Prows	
32	Reliefs	
33	Reliquaries	
34	Rockets	
35	Sacred Architecture	
36	Scents and Perfumes	
37	Sculptures	
38	Sign Languages	
39	Signposts and Signage	
40	Sky Discs	
41	Smoke Signals	
42	Stained Glass	
43	Sundials	
44	Tapestries	
45	Tattoos	

D100	Medium	Variants
46	Trophies	
47	Typography	
48	Uniforms	
49	Vanitas	
50	Wildlife	

MAKING MONSTERS

Designing intriguing or fearsome monsters for PCs to take on isn't straightforward. Many options are already covered by existing categories found in plenty of tabletop RPGs and it takes a bit of thought to come up with something novel.

New monsters, tribes and races can't rely on physical appearances to entertain players. They have to present a genuine threat and require players to use some thinking to escape from, win over or defeat the new adversary.

Many monsters, tribes and races are based around countless variations on mythological creatures, which have all been used time and again. Adding bizarre or highly exotic creatures often doesn't fit either, as players are often unfamiliar with the concept or mythology and may, therefore, find it difficult to consider the monster or the threat it presents as anything other than a 'bolt-on'.

So where can GMs find some credible, fearsome monsters that players can easily identify as both threatening and intriguing? As it happens, real world wildlife provides a good source of plenty of

dangerous creatures, which are easily adapted to present particular difficulties for players to overcome:

Asian Ants include a species which can explode their abdomens and release toxins over their enemies. The odd group could add danger to an encounter where PCs meet them for the first time, while large numbers of these walking bombs would be a major problem if controlled by pheromones/ scents held in the hands of a sinister opponent.

Basilisk Lizards are well-known for feet that move so fast that they can run on water at up to 3.3 mph (5.4 km/h). Walking on water, (and the other attributes of lizards), make these reptiles a stand-out as a humanoid race or tribe, because of the combination of maneuverability, toughness and speed they offer. Players might find them very difficult opponents unless they can find ways to cool down the overall environment, or the lizards, until the lizards become lethargic.

Bees are always a good option for sending players into a panic as they search for water, or other escapes, from swarming attacks along the lines of African Killer bee attacks. A less predictable, but potentially very damaging, approach is to take account of the figure of 300 stings, which is usually enough to kill a human.

Intermittent encounters with bees across a setting could lead to a tally of bee stings, which kicks-in with a number of side effects as players accumulate more stings over weeks and months. Some of the effects might offer temporary benefits. PCs can be drawn in by

optional, incidental contact encounters, e.g. help a NPC to remove a hive, follow a Honey Badger to a hive or rescue a kid standing dangerously near to a swarm.

Hummingbirds need to eat every ten minutes and consume as much as 2/3 of their body weight in a single day. A flight of beautiful, but deadly, hummingbirds could present a real barrier to PCs, until the players realize they have to disrupt the hummingbirds' food supply to disable them.

Mimic Octopuses can change color, shape and texture almost instantaneously. This allows them to mimic a Flounder, a Sea Snake or a Lionfish. A natural mimic, capable of disguising itself as something harmless, something to be avoided and something to fear, (without even revealing its true form), lets players unwrap the challenges the monster presents as an increasing threat. Which works particularly well when the forms taken are broadly similar and players aren't observing the dramatic shifts of form involved in polymorphing magic.

Tomato Frogs are able to secrete glue as a defense. A wide range of disruption and danger could easily result from encountering such creatures. Pools of glue left in their trail could get on the PCs, weapons might stick to the frogs, (or a comparable 'glue monster'), and PCs could try to collect and use the glue.

These options demonstrate a few of the choices available for varying monsters and races. Exploding ants add a new, unusual weapon; Basilisk Lizards are highly adaptable; bee stings can wear

PCs down; Hummingbirds can encourage players to be less direct; Mimic Octopuses are heavily disguised; and Tomato Frogs offer options for a bit of chaos and confusion.

There are lots more real world creatures that serve-up ideas for novel monsters, races and tribes. By considering them in terms of weaponry, adaptability, impact, challenges, subterfuges and novelty it's easier to bring together a combination of features that intrigues and/ or unsettles PCs and their players.

There may be other criteria to add to the list presented here, but relatively few creatures seem likely to add much to play unless they can tick a few of these boxes.

KILLER TRAPS

OUT OF THE BLUE

Traps are part and parcel of many tabletop RPG adventures and have been for a very long time. Certain types of scenarios and encounters might reasonably be expected to contain dangerous traps, (e.g. an ancient tomb or an Assassin's den). The traps placed in such locations can present threats, may offer challenges and might put the PCs through the mill.

Where there's an expectation of damaging traps players can think through possible precautions and counter-measures they might wish to take with them. Players are then aware of the risks, to some extent prepared and clearly making a choice to participate in an adventure where the stakes may well be high.

Traps that appear completely out of nowhere and undermine players' imaginative expectations or simply slaughter much-loved PCs 'for a laugh' are a different matter. This seems particularly clear when a GM makes a trap that's consistently deadly.

The disadvantages of using lethal traps in tabletop RPGs often outweigh the benefits:

1. Players may feel cheated if traps arrive completely out of the blue.
2. If there is too much warning most players will keep PCs well clear.
3. Players may spend the next game year checking round every corner.
4. Players' nerves can get stuck on edge; making it hard to lower and raise tension.
5. The party of PCs may become unable to continue a long-running adventure or quest.
6. Players could feel cheated if the lethality relies on limiting possible solutions.
7. Traps that aren't authentic or able to fit the context may be seen as contrived.
8. Outright kills can seem unreasonable if capture or confinement would be more effective.

Having one or two of these factors eating into the entertainment is problematic. Taking all of them on at the same time is, perhaps, a bit of a recipe for demoralizing players. Nevertheless, while alternatives to outright kills are available, on occasions when a

lethal or potentially lethal trap is called for it's a compromise to remove much or all of the risk.

One way of sidestepping potential difficulties is to make it relatively easy for survivors to raise or resurrect fallen comrades. This approach works up to a point, but falls flat when conveniently restoring PCs to life becomes either straightforward or routine.

TRAPS AS ENCOUNTERS

It seems more eventful and demanding to keep the risks high, while presenting lethal traps more as open-ended encounters than as random outcomes. In other words, instead of triggering traps and rolling a saving throw to survive, players will, ideally, 'unpack' a trap which evolves as PCs make choices and take actions that determine whether or not the trap proves lethal.

The original version of the notorious classic D&D adventure, The Tomb of Horrors, presents good examples of traps which demonstrate the distinction between the random and the resolved. On a number of occasions a PC, or even the whole party of PCs, is told that a deadly trap has been triggered and a quick saving throw roll soon decides the fate of a PC or PCs. On other occasions the traps are open to solutions, which may not save the PCs but do turn each trap into an encounter involving choices and actions.

In the original Tomb of Horrors adventure there's a particularly good 'choker' trap which contains all the elements of a classic trap, (i.e. it's basically a flooding pit), and an encounter. Players are handed a deteriorating situation and have to uncover a series of choices that make sense in terms of saving the party there and then.

However, it's hard for players to do so, as the solutions are made counter-intuitive by obviously endangering the party at a later stage.

Players are put under plenty of pressure by the flooding element of the trap, while having to find unappealing solutions and, very rapidly, select the best of a bad lot. Those who react quickly and thoughtfully probably survive; those who dither or opt for the more costly solutions either die there and then or continue much weakened.

The key elements of such a trap are the deteriorating situation, the risks, the need to investigate, the choices open to players and the actions their PCs carry out, which decide and feed into the encounter's various outcomes. These should leave room for creative players to offer solutions from outside the box.

OUTCOMES

Here are a couple of lethal traps aimed at pulling together the components of a trap which functions as or within an encounter. Solutions open to players may include disarming, containing, re-purposing or running away from the trap:

The PCs are involved in the construction of a large ship set in blocks near to the shoreline. Shortly before the vessel is complete the lashings holding it in place fail and the whole ship begins lurching towards the water. The PCs, some small children and/ or a visiting ambassador find themselves in the path of the ship; and all but the players either don't notice or are rooted to the spot.

The PCs could lose their lives; the ship; the goodwill of the locals; or even witness the start of a war if they don't come up with some decent solutions - and fast. The time available to players is easily adjusted to allow players a few opportunities to intervene by following a sequence from the snapping sounds of the lashings as they break, to the slow lurch forward as the ship starts off and, finally, the blur of motion as the ship gains speed and approaches the water. During that time PCs' actions may slow or accelerate the process, as players consider their priorities, select actions and react to ongoing outcomes.

Moving indoors, it's not difficult to find a similar combination of open-ended gameplay using everyday occurrences. For example, dense clouds of grain dust are usually released from rice, corn and wheat crops when they're winnowed, threshed, decanted, elevated or spilt. In an enclosed space it takes no more than a spark for these clouds to explode in highly incendiary air-bursts, which are often fatal.

By introducing crop dust to an enclosed area, (whether through breaking a container, harvesting or deliberate spillage), the use of metal weapons, torches and fireballs all become potentially lethal. The risks may vary, but fighting, spellcasting or closing a door might all contribute to increasingly dense concentrations of dust in the air.

Those who avoid activity and don't send out any sparks may hardly notice the dust. However, those who stir up the dust are going to feel a bit choked up, start to see 'Will-o-the-Wisp' like bursts of

flame near torches and lanterns, and, if they keep going, trigger a full-blown explosion.

There are any number of potential triggers and solutions which, critically, come down to players making choices. For example, water will quickly prevent the dust from rising but may leave the PCs and the chamber coated in a layer of porridge, which might, through the players' actions alone, result in a more deadly trap than that presented by the original threat. For instance, any snap frost effect directed at a porridge-coated PC is likely to result in a serious loss of mobility as the PC is, at least temporarily, converted into a stumbling cereal bar.

Lethal traps that simply deliver random outcomes, therefore, appear to take choices away from players and to serve only to deplete PCs' resources. Potentially lethal traps, which offer players a range of options and actions, (linked to variable outcomes), seem to be able to turn traps into complete encounters, with all the gameplay options associated with an encounter rather than a mere mechanical trap.

In addition, traps with solutions are, perhaps, more authentic. It might seem to make sense, or seem consistent, to put largely unavoidable traps in a secret tomb. However, when such traps are mixed with more complete traps that are open to being solved, the 'deadly' tomb model loses its internal logic, i.e. why would there be any chance of surviving if the sole purpose of the exercise was to seal the tomb absolutely and forever.

Perhaps it's more entertaining, and forgiving, to design a tomb containing knowledge or wealth only available to 'the worthy', i.e. those capable of navigating and negotiating the dangers, rather than those fortunate enough to roll their saving throws.

WHAT KIND OF PLAYER OR GM AM I?

There are a few 'what kind of player or character class are you?' quizzes available to players. These are typically part magazine quiz, part guidance and part nonsense. Sure it's amusing to match your style of play into categories such as a Fighter or an Assassin. However, in doing so a quiz is starting to define your character through the classes available within a game.

For example, if you select b) three times you might be advised to play, for example, full-on fighters. The fact that you also ticked d) twice for wanting to be stealthy generally doesn't come into it.

In other words, such quizzes are usually trying to run a pop quiz for a laugh, while pouring players' characters into a genre and/ or game specific template. Considering what is actually most likely to appeal to an individual is a slightly different exercise, which involves taking a quick look at what we, as individuals, wish to put into and get out of RPG gameplay.



PLAYER/ GM PROFILES

Add your own options to build up a larger list and compare players' records to identify common ground for campaigns and areas to avoid or research more.

Broad campaign-wide challenges are outlined in more detail elsewhere, but it is helpful for players to use rough headings at the planning stage. This leaves room for the GM to offer plenty of surprises and to discuss options in general terms without play becoming predictable as a result of players going into a lot of detail.

GENRES YOU MIGHT LIKE

Grade 1/ 2/ 3/ 4/ 5 - 5 is the highest score

No.	Genre	1	2	3	4	5
1	Cartoon					
2	Comedy					
3	Cyberpunk					
4	Dark Fantasy					
5	Detective					
6	Espionage					
7	Fantasy					
8	Historical					
9	Horror					
10	Modern					
11	Multi-Genre					
12	SciFi					
13	Science Fantasy					
14	Steampunk					
15	Urban Fantasy					
16	Western					

PREFERENCES

Grade 1/ 2/ 3/ 4/ 5 - 5 is the highest score

No.	Preference	1	2	3	4	5
1	Bought-In Adventures					

No.	Preference	1	2	3	4	5
2	Difficulty: PCs					
3	Difficulty: Players					
4	Fast Turns					
5	Fine-Grained Detail					
6	Freeform					
7	Guidelines					
8	Homebrew Adventures					
9	Improvisational					
10	RPG Sandbox					
11	Rules					
12	Rules Heavy					
13	Rules Light					
14	TPKs					
15	Under Pressure					

AT THE TABLE

Grade 1/ 2/ 3/ 4/ 5 - 5 is the highest score

No.	Item	1	2	3	4	5
1	Battle Grid					
2	Counters					
3	Dice: Digital					
4	Dice: Real					
5	Drawn Maps					
6	Dungeon Tiles					
7	Feedback					

No.	Item	1	2	3	4	5
8	Figures					
9	Laptops					
10	No Tabletop					
11	Online Chat					
12	Online Tabletop					
13	Phones					
14	Projector					
15	Props: Novelty					
16	Sticky Notes					
17	Tablets					
18	Terrain					

ENJOYABLE PARTS OF THE GAMEPLAY?

Grade 1/ 2/ 3/ 4/ 5 - 5 is the highest score

No.	Gameplay	1	2	3	4	5
1	Action					
2	Authenticity					
3	Combat					
4	Comedy					
5	Cut Scenes					
6	Deceptions					
7	Discovery					
8	Enterprise					
9	Escapes					
10	Exploration					
11	Grime					

No.	Gameplay	1	2	3	4	5
12	Grit					
13	Improvising					
14	Investigation					
15	Mysteries					
16	Negotiations					
17	Quick Turns					
18	Pursuits					
19	Roll With The Punches					
20	Setbacks					
21	Simulation					
22	Spinechillers					
23	Story					
24	Surprises					
25	Suspense					
26	Tactical Combat					
27	Thinking On Your Feet					
28	Traps					
29	Tricks					
30	Troubleshooting					

As a whole, the text of this guide favors authenticity over simulation. However, there are games, often played by practiced players, which, for example, combine very authentic SciFi simulation alongside imaginative gameplay.

WHICH OF THESE CHALLENGES APPEAL MOST?

Suggestions on what each of the campaign-wide challenges listed here might involve are set-out later. However, there's no need to look at those at this stage, as it can be more helpful to think in terms of how you might define these challenges for yourself – if only in general terms.

Grade 1/ 2/ 3/ 4/ 5 - 5 is the highest score

No.	Challenge	1	2	3	4	5
1	Conquest and Colonization					
2	Counter Insurgency					
3	Crime Fighting					
4	Disasters and Crisis Management					
6	Dawn of the Undead					
7	Enterprise and Commerce					
8	Espionage and Infiltration					
9	Internecine Warfare					
10	Marine Life					
11	Massive Meteor Strikes					
12	Mysteries and Investigations					
13	Research and Experimentation					
14	Revolution					
15	Survival Scenarios					
16	Warfare and Sieges					

INTERESTED IN ANY OF THESE RPG EXTRAS?

Grade 1/ 2/ 3/ 4/ 5 - 5 is the highest score

No.	Extra	1	2	3	4	5
1	Campaign Blog					
2	Campaign Wiki					
3	Chat Meetings					
4	Coloring Sheets					
5	Figure Painting					
6	Online Sessions					

GLOSSARY

ADVENTURE

A typical RPG adventure is a fairly self-contained mission or scenario played over one or more sessions.

ATTRIBUTES

These often describe natural abilities shared by all characters, such as physical strength or wisdom.

BLUE BOOKING

This involves players who log their characters' activities after the actual gameplay to record continuous character histories. The records are then available to support play involving actions separate from those of the rest of the group.

BUILD

A build usually refers to rules-heavy RPGs where hours may be spent preparing players' characters to customize and optimize the resulting character through the rule set.

CAMPAIGN

A campaign involves a whole series of inter-related adventures within a consistent game-world.

CHARACTER CREATION

This is the method used to create a character. For example, points may be spent across a range of skills or a character may have a well-defined class/ set of complementary, specialist skills.

CHARACTER OR PC SHEET

Player characters' specializations, game statistics, and background information are summarized and brought together on a PC Sheet for easy access during play.

CHARACTER

A character or adventurer is an avatar or fictional character representing a role or characterization within a RPG.

CLASS

A character is typically sketched out with a cluster of related abilities and skills. One quick way to help players to adopt a basic role is to group these skills and/ or abilities into a character class. E.g. a Fighter that is strong, familiar with a wide range of weaponry and skilled in battle.

CLONES OR RETRO~CLONES

These are remakes or remixes of early RPGs made under a range of permissive license conditions. They fall into a number of categories including: retro-clones that emulate an earlier rules set; 'pseudo-clones' that make significant changes to the earlier rules; and, more recently, clones that emulate a rules system - but add new content to set the gameplay of the earlier version alongside a range of extra options.

CRITICAL (HIT)

The highest natural die rolls available within a RPG often indicate a strong outcome, which may be amplified through knock-on bonuses, e.g. a natural 20 on a D20 often guarantees success or a damage multiplier.

CRUNCH

Crunch is the mechanical side of the rules, which measure actions and outcomes during play.

DUNGEON~CRAWL

The classic dungeon-crawl is mainly about taking a party of ‘good’ adventurers into dungeons and caverns where they encounter a mix of basic traps, slay as many ‘evil’ monsters as possible and recover any treasure. Typical options include raiding tombs and clearing out evil temples.

FREEFORM

Freeform gameplay is typically a rules-light style of play that invites players to lead the narrative. This often places mechanical rules in the background and relies on players developing gameplay more through the contexts and situations they encounter than the rules set.

FLUFF

Content that doesn’t contribute directly to the mechanics of a system, (including descriptions, hints and tips or support for building adventures), is known as fluff.

FUMBLE

A fumble is usually a major error committed while trying to carry out a difficult task, e.g. a natural 1 on a D20 may be an automatic fail, regardless of the circumstances.

GAME~WORLD

The game-world is the imaginary world and the activities within that imaginary world that players explore through their characters.

Some game-worlds thrive on the expectations and authenticity offered by a particular genre, e.g. Western RPGs. Others may be quite alien and unfamiliar, e.g. alien SciFi cultures.

GM OR GAMESMASTER

The GM is the player who often designs adventures, runs play and settles outcomes. Some games have their own specialized term, such as Dungeon Master.

GENRE

A game may stick to a single genre or look to support a number of genres. These are the core tropes – and associated expectations – underlying imaginative gameplay. Obvious examples include fantasy and SciFi.

GRIMY

Grimy gameplay is run along similar lines to the gritty gameplay mentioned below, i.e. a dose of real world options running through the overall RPG gameplay mix. However, rather than relying on typical grit the game uses mess, deformation, disgusting local food and maybe the odd intestinal parasite to make play slightly more slapstick, earthy and/ or comic. This taps into the very realistic history found in books or shows like Horrible Histories.

GRITTY

Play that aims to include greater real world authenticity involves adding grit. This can be intended to make play more realistic, e.g. wounds take a long time to heal. However, it may also be aimed at delivering improvisation and authenticity, through borrowing from real-world circumstances and situations. This can involve realism, e.g. a realistic, but flexible, consideration of the effects and knock-

on effects resulting from a meteor strike and/ or adding familiar themes and expectations into play.

HEX-CRAWL

A Hex-crawl offers one of the simplest approaches to forming open-ended campaign worlds. A blank or barely marked map of hexes is uncovered as players proceed from one territorial zone to the next. The crawl can be kept entirely random with players and/ or the GM rolling to find out what appears as each hex is encountered. Terrain and core political boundaries/ capital cities may be put in place to allow links and knock-on effects between hexes - to present opportunities for plot or character development.

INITIATIVE

Initiative is often a dice roll, with modifiers, that decides who gets to go first when groups of characters first encounter one another.

LEVEL

Level can refer to the floor levels of the dungeons or complexes that characters are exploring. However, it is also commonly used to indicate the experience or advancement a player has accumulated, which then matches some of the characters' capabilities to those available to everyone at the same level.

LIVE ACTION (ROLEPLAYING)

LARPs are a type of role-playing game delivered as a physical performance in the manner of a group of improvisational actors.

MEGADUNGEON

These are massive, multi-leveled dungeons, which vary greatly in that some are simply sprawling traditional dungeons, while others

are subterranean settings for more deeply plotted and/ or imagined worlds.

META~GAMING

The use of out-of-character knowledge or understandings to solve in-character problems is known as meta-gaming. Such knowledge or understanding may also be used to explain or justify actions carried out in-character.

MIN~MAXER

Players who make characters based on optimization instead of characterization may be known as Min-Maxers for disregarding attributes and skills which they consider non-essential in exchange for boosting attributes and skills that gain an advantage. This often involves enhancing combat skills at the expense of areas like intelligence and diplomacy.

MUNCHKIN

Munchkin is a term used to describe a self-orientated player who likes to grandstand and stay in the spotlight. They are often willing to find ways of adapting, or twisting, rules to get round the limitations placed on other players' characters.

NATURAL (ROLL)

This means an unmodified roll such as a natural 1 or a natural 20.

NEW SCHOOL

The now rather dated New School refers largely to more recent versions of Dungeons and Dragons, 3.0E – 4.0E, which generally involve multi-volume rule sets with rules-heavy combat options.

NPC (NON-PLAYER CHARACTER)

These characters are the people and personalities that player characters (PCs) encounter during their adventures. Some are likely to be hostile; but many are likely to be open to some form of negotiation or trade-off.

OLD SCHOOL

The OSR, (Old School Revival/ Old School Renaissance), refers to games similar to the early versions of Dungeons and Dragons, OE to 2E, which tend to offer rules-light, improvisational play based around relatively short rule sets. The appearance of clones/ re-mixed copies of older titles has made many Old School games widely available after a lengthy break.

PC (PLAYER CHARACTER)

A player's avatar or character in a game is usually known as a PC.

POINT BUY

This usually refers to making characters using a wide choice of skill and/ or ability options selected by the player. All players' PCs get the same number of points to spend on skills or abilities, which they may choose to group to make a more specialist character – or to spread around to gain a wider range of skills.

POWERGAMER

Powergamers are focused on gaining maximum advantage from mastering the rules in great detail. Most players will make some effort to optimize a PC, but a Powergamer takes this to the extent of seeking an unfair advantage or badgering the GM.

POWERS

This is a term often used to describe exceptional abilities which make a character extraordinary, e.g. flight or telepathy. Powers are commonly used in superhero games.

RACE

A character's genetic and cultural heritage can include anything from the standard human races through to fantasy races, mutants, robots and aliens.

RAILROADING

This involves the GM, the rules or a shrink-wrapped setting limiting player choice by requiring players to take certain actions and/ or channeling players towards particular choices. Railroading is often associated with GMs spelling out elaborate plots with fixed outcomes. While some measure of plot direction or railroading can be helpful in terms of providing an immersive setting, beyond a certain point railroading undermines player choice.

REVERSE DUNGEON

A reverse dungeon or scenario flips the standard model of adventurers 'conquering' a dungeon by placing the party in the position of defending a dungeon against intruders.

ROLL~PLAYING

Rules-heavy RPGs that rely largely on mechanical rules typically involve lots of dice rolling. This approach tends to set aside areas like characterization, storybuilding, discovery and exploration – so the term roll-playing simply recognizes that play is focusing on game mechanics at the expense of roleplaying.

RULES LAWYER

These players try to use knowledge of a RPG's rules set to press for an unfair advantage by calling for interpretations of the rules to consistently fall in their favor. They may also be keen to insist that particular rules which are widely known for unbalancing a game have to be adhered to.

RULES~HEAVY

The multi-volume hardback set is a staple for games that tend to have a mechanical rule to cover most actions and situations within the game. Such rules tend to favor simulation over a sense of authenticity.

RULES~LITE

These are cut-down or level limited games that are often given out as demonstrations. The term may also be applied to particularly short rule sets, such as Risus, but such games, perhaps, belong in the rules-light category, as they are able to support a series of adventures.

RULES~LIGHT (TO MEDIUM)

Games with limited mechanics that rely on players to fill in the gaps using negotiation and their imaginations are probably the largest RPG category. They may be quite short with simplistic mechanics that leave a lot for players to fill out. Alternatively, a rules light system may contain a solid rules framework and lots of fluff aimed at helping GMs to design and deliver adventures and settings.

SANDBOX

There's a certain amount of confusion over the use of the term sandbox, as the RPG definition tends to vary from more general use

of the term. In a RPG placing an adventure in a sandbox often means the opposite of railroading, as adventures are driven by players' choices, which the GM reacts to on the basis of expanding on a basic framework through improvisation.

SAVING THROW

A 'save' or saving throw is a very common game mechanic in which dice are used to try to avoid some kind of negative outcome.

SCENARIO

The term scenario is interchangeable with the term adventure.

SESSION

A game session is a single meeting of a roleplaying group.

SETTINGS

These are the fictional worlds in which gameplay takes place. The term is comparable to a campaign, but a campaign is, possibly, a combination of a setting and the actions and event going on within a setting.

SKILLS

The results of training and learning are often described as skills, e.g. fencing or navigation skills.

TEAM PLAY

These systems allow the game to be run without a Referee/ GM either by distributing the GM's tasks or by offering options similar to solo RPGs.

TPK (TOTAL PARTY KILL)

There are some games, such as horror titles, where it's part of the entertainment to kill off the players – eventually. However, in most cases killing a PC, (without some magical or technological means of recovery), isn't such a good idea, as a player may have put time and effort into the character. A full-blown, no way back TPK against experienced characters often collapses the gameplay/ a campaign.

THE RPG HANDBOOK – GETTING STARTED

The RPG Handbook – Getting Started is a system-free guide to playing tabletop roleplaying games (RPGs). The handbook looks at:

1. Inviting new players to try out tabletop RPGs.
2. Getting kids involved in trying out imaginative games.
3. Emphasizing deeper character development.
4. Turning players into GMs - and GMs into games designers.
5. Offering GMs the means to rapidly create custom campaigns.
6. Building more player choice into adventures and campaigns.



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