

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Focusing on what you love about TTRPGs
- » Creating a new game from the ground up
- » Using an existing game system in your TTRPG
- » Making games for fun or profit

Chapter **1**

Introducing TTRPG Design

Tabletop role playing game (TTRPG) design brings together creative writing, technical writing, math and statistics, art, cartography, and graphic design.

And that's just for starters! *Publishing* your game requires doing market analysis, hiring freelancers, protecting and promoting your work, finding publishers or manufacturers, and traveling to conventions.

It's a lot, but don't worry: You don't *need* to do all of these things. You might play a TTRPG you love, for example, and now you want to create an awesome new adventure for your friends. Printing your game and selling it at conventions doesn't really appeal to you.

And that's fine! The first step in game design is refining your goals so that you can focus on what's most important.

This chapter provides an overview of TTRPG design to help you identify what you enjoy most about the process, so that you can concentrate your energy on what you love. It also covers important differences between making a game from scratch and “playing in someone else's sandbox” — writing an adventure for an existing

game or adapting its rules for your own game. Finally, this chapter discusses the risks and rewards of publishing and selling your work so that you go into the process with your eyes open.

You can approach TTRPG design in many different ways. This chapter helps you plot the course that works best for you.

Learning What You Truly Love about TTRPGs

TTRPG design offers something for everyone. If you love working with numbers and solving difficult puzzles, developing game *mechanics*, the rules and accessories (like cards and dice) players use to determine what happens, might be your favorite part of design. (See Chapter 8 for more information on mechanics.)

On the other hand, if you like writing and telling stories, inventing new characters and adventures probably brings you the most joy. (See Part 4 of this book to learn all the ins and outs of writing a TTRPG adventure.)

Most designers gravitate more toward one aspect of TTRPGs than another. But liking one element more than another doesn't mean you *can't* tackle the entire job yourself. If you'd rather not spend lots of time with statistics, for example, you might choose to design a *rules-light* game that relies more on the players to determine what happens. (Chapter 3 discusses the difference between crunchy games, with complex and detailed mechanics, and rules-light games.)



TIP

Learning what you truly love about TTRPGs helps you set your design goals. For example, if what you love to do is tell stories, your time and effort can be best spent writing adventures for an existing system, as I discuss later in this chapter.



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Licensing agreements governing game content — like the Open Game License (OGL), Creative Commons, and others — make it possible to design a TTRPG without starting from the beginning. (See Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of the OGL and other licenses and how they contributed to the explosion of new games in the TTRPG market.)

Here are some tips for determining where your TTRPG passions lie:

» **If you play TTRPGs currently, reflect on your behavior.** If you spend lots of time coming up with a backstory for your *player character* (PC), the fictional persona whose role you play in the game, and learning the game world's

lore — its history, mythology, and politics — writing might be your preferred design focus. (You'll love Chapter 5 of this book!) If you're more of a *rules lawyer* — someone with an intimate knowledge of the game's rules who likes to discuss how they work — you'll likely feel at home creating your own mechanics.

- » **Or when you read a TTRPG book, note what chapters interest you.** Much like how you play a game, the way you read its rules tells you a lot about what you enjoy most about TTRPGs. Poring over the chapters devoted to the setting or focused on creating a new adventure is a good sign that writing is in your wheelhouse. On the other hand, if you notice you're studying the combat rules and spellcasting mechanics, you're likely to have fun developing a rule system of your own. (See Chapter 3 to learn how to play and read TTRPGs like a game designer.)
- » **When watching or playing a TTRPG, see what grabs your attention.** Every TTRPG *session* (a concentrated period that people spend playing the game) combines moments focused on role playing with moments when the rules and mechanics take center stage. (The best sessions combine them almost seamlessly, but even then, you'll see times when everyone waits to find out what happens when someone draws a card or rolls a die.) Look for the moments when you lean forward: If players talking about their characters interest you the most, you're likely to be drawn to writing. If you're carefully watching what happens when players roll dice or draw cards, you might have a knack for mechanics.

You have lots of decisions to make when it comes to setting your TTRPG design goals. The first is whether you want to create an entirely new game or write adventures for one you already enjoy. Both are great fun, but you should do what makes you happy.

After all, this is *your* quest.

Building a TTRPG from Scratch

If you enjoy both TTRPG mechanics and storytelling — and don't worry if you prefer one more than another — *and* you're excited to create something entirely your own, designing a new game might be just the challenge you're looking for.



TIP

With so many games in print, you need to have a clear understanding of *why* you're making a new one. Maybe you enjoy the design process for its own sake or you want to make something to play with your friends. Or maybe you want to reach a larger audience or even start a side hustle. (The end of this chapter explores

the difference between pursuing game design as a hobby or a business, and Chapter 22 covers publishing and selling your work.)

You can do any or all of these things when you design a new TTRPG, but take the time to know what's involved, *especially* if you hope to sell your game.

Defining what your TTRPG offers to players



TIP

To answer the question “Why make a new TTRPG?” you need a clear sense of what *your* game offers that existing games don't.

Think of the *experience* you want people to have. Perhaps you have a cool setting that's never been done, where players can become mind-bogglingly weird characters that they can't be in other games. For example, maybe you're creating a game where everyone plays a living puppet putting on a variety show. (Hmm. I'd watch a show like that one!)

Because many TTRPGs include combat and magic, you might decide that you *have* to make a new game to match the collaborative spirit you want your puppet game to foster. (See Chapters 5 and 6 for more information on developing a setting and characters.)

Or maybe you have a new approach to mechanics, radically different from the familiar dice systems found in TTRPGs. I write a lot of adventures for existing TTRPGs, but I started work on my current project, *SpellCaster the TTRPG*, because I wanted to create a game that used letter tiles. My setting, an alternative 19th century, isn't so unusual — plenty of games use a similar one — but my mechanics require a new TTRPG. (Chapter 10 discusses alternatives to dice-based games.)



REMEMBER

With so many TTRPGs already on the market, it's vital that you know what makes your game unique if you hope to publish and sell it. If you're not sure, your time (and your money) might be better spent creating an adventure or setting for an existing game.

Knowing your potential market

At the risk of stating the obvious — a risk I'm *always* willing to take, by the way — games are meant to be played. (See? I told you.) When you're designing a new TTRPG, imagine the people you hope will play it. And more importantly, if you're hoping to *sell* your game, the people you hope will *buy* it.

If you're making the living-puppet variety show TTRPG, for example, your primary audience could be families, or even grade-school teachers and students. I'm making *SpellCaster* for players who enjoy word games, so I'm thinking of older players.



Once you identify your potential market, find out how many other games also appeal to those players. The fewer there are, the stronger the case for making and publishing your own!

Don't be discouraged if the market is crowded, though. The fact that dozens of fantasy-themed TTRPGs already exist doesn't mean you can't make your own and be successful. But it *does* mean you need to make a strong case for why players should give yours a try. Chapter 23 provides advice on promoting your game and building your audience.

Knowing who you hope plays your game also affects your word choice and the complexity of your rules. (See Chapter 3 for more information about analyzing a game's audience and voice.) You write differently for children under 12 than you do for adults, for example. (Or at least you should!) Keep your potential players in mind throughout the design process. Chapter 19 discusses reviewing your writing while thinking about your audience.

Identifying pitfalls when designing your new TTRPG

Creating a TTRPG from scratch can be very rewarding, but it's not without risks. Before diving into the deep end of game design, keep in mind the following potential pitfalls:

- » **New mechanics demand significant playtesting.** After more than 50 years of role playing games, players and designers have a pretty good idea of what works and why. That doesn't mean you can't try something new, but it *does* mean you need to do more playtesting than if your rules relied on common accessories like dice. For more information on playtesting your mechanics, check out Chapter 13.
- » **New TTRPGs may require specialized manufacturing or additional purchases by players.** Imagine you've created a new TTRPG focused on using darts to determine the outcome of player actions. That sounds fun, but keep in mind that it also means anyone playing your game needs darts and a dartboard. You can manufacture and package them with your game, or you can tell the players they need to get darts on their own. Either way, you're asking more of your audience than you would if you used an existing

mechanic. As I work on *SpellCaster*, for example, I'm researching companies that can make letter tiles. See Chapter 22 to learn more about finding publishers and manufacturers.

» **Creating a new TTRPG means building a new audience.** The first TTRPG adventure I wrote and published with my friends was designed to be compatible with the fantasy role playing game *Dungeon Crawl Classics* (DCC) from Goodman Games. Anyone picking up that adventure knows what to expect and how the rules work. Even better, Goodman Games helped market our work to their established audience. When creating a brand-new game, *you're* primarily responsible for getting the word out to potential players and for making the case for why they should give your game a try.



WARNING

Designing a new TTRPG takes a lot of time and effort. And if you want to sell your game, you'll also need to invest in everything from high-quality art to promotion to a website. As I discuss in Chapter 22, *crowdfunding* — offering your product or other rewards in return for upfront financial support — can help cover these costs, but not all crowdfunding campaigns succeed, and they rarely provide enough funding for ongoing marketing expenses. Like any business venture, designing and selling a new TTRPG requires investment without a guaranteed return.

Embracing opportunities in creating a new TTRPG

Though the risks of making a new TTRPG are real, so are the rewards. For example, by creating your own game, you avoid any licensing limitations: You own every part of your game. (See Chapter 2 for more information on games and licensing, and Chapter 22 for advice on copyrights and trademarks.)

And though it's true existing games have ready-made audiences you can tap into, they also have loads of creators writing adventures and competing for attention. When I wrote my first adventure compatible with *Dungeon Crawl Classics* (DCC), for example, independent publishers produced only a few titles a year. Now, if you search for *DCC-compatible* adventures, you find dozens, with more appearing all the time.

Creating a new game means building a new audience, but it also sets you apart in a crowded field.

Controlling every aspect of the world — its characters and how it helps people tell stories — makes game design great fun. TTRPGs are creative expressions, after all, so creating a game from scratch lets you share your vision most completely.

(See Part 2 of this book for a thorough overview of the many places, people, and more you create when designing a TTRPG.)

Making TTRPGs Using Existing Rule Systems

You don't need to create an entirely new rule system to enjoy TTRPG game design and learn the ropes. Many publishers provide licenses that let creators write and sell adventures using their rules or set in their worlds.



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Some publishers also allow designers to retool their rules for use in new settings. Wizards of the Coast started this when they released the Open Game License, and other companies have followed suit. (See Chapter 2 to learn more about this license and how it opened up the TTRPG industry.) Creators have adapted DCC rules for everything from superheroes to the Weird West, for example. (See Chapter 4 to learn more about game genres.) And Chaosium, the publisher of the horror game *Call of Cthulhu*, published *Basic Role playing: Universal Game Engine*, a version of its rule set that creators can use to make their own games.

If you're interested in creating a new game but feel nervous about coming up with your own mechanics, finding out whether your favorite game supports this kind of independent creativity might be the way to go. (But you shouldn't be *afraid* of creating your own mechanics. Part 3 of this book gives you everything you need to get started.)

Knowing the audience

Whether you write an adventure for an existing game or adapt its rule system to design something new, take time to learn about its audience. With so many TTRPGs on the market, particular games appeal to different players for different reasons. Chapter 3 discusses playing games like a designer, paying close attention to a TTRPG's "voice" and what that tells you about its audience.



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DCC, for example, is an *Old-School Renaissance* (OSR) game that appeals to players who prefer TTRPGs that harken back to the early days of role playing games. (See Chapter 2 more for information on the OSR, and notice that I am *not* saying OSR fans are old-timers, though some of us certainly are.)

Some games, like Paizo’s fantasy TTRPG *Pathfinder*, are *crunchy* games — they have complex and sophisticated rules. Chapter 3 explores how these games differ from the simpler mechanics of *rules-light* games.

Both DCC and *Pathfinder* provide *third-party* licenses that allow people to write and publish material for their systems if they follow certain guidelines. (I’ll say more about these licenses in a moment.) Though both offer great opportunities, they appeal to different types of players. Whichever publisher or rule system you work with, you want *your* game or adventure to tap into its appeal and reach its audience.

Focusing on what matters in an existing system

In some games, setting and genre matter most. For example, the publisher Chaosium supports independent creators for its long-running horror TTRPG *Call of Cthulhu*. If you wanted to write a *Cthulhu* adventure, you should, in addition to following the guidelines of the licensing agreement, capture the feeling of the genre.

Call of Cthulhu isn’t the system to use if you want to write a cozy game focused on a group of friends running a tea shop. (Chapter 4 provides an overview of some of the most popular TTRPG genres.) Players expect horror, often with a historical or real-world feel, and your adventure should reflect that.

You should also be sure to employ a game’s distinct mechanics if you create adventures for its system. The Arcane Library’s *Shadowdark*, for example, an OSR-inspired fantasy TTRPG, uses timers to track how long light sources last. Once an hour of actual gameplay time ends, the torches go out. (See Chapter 10 to learn more about using clocks and timers in games.)



WARNING

Writing an adventure for *Shadowdark* where the player characters never go underground or spend time in the dark would be a mistake because you’d miss a big part of what makes the game unique. (I mean, look at the game’s name — it’s a huge clue!)

Most TTRPGs have features players remember, so spend time playing a game before you commit to writing an adventure for it. The more you play, the better you understand what makes it stand out. You can also learn what players enjoy most about a TTRPG by visiting online forums and following the publisher’s social media.



REMEMBER

When you decide to write an adventure for an existing game or adapt its system for your own use, you need to understand what makes it special and what players expect to see.

And, of course, you need to respect the publisher's guidelines, and that means . . .

Reading the fine print

Because the original OGL enabled so many creators to launch their own TTRPGs, many publishers now follow in that tradition by allowing fans to create games using their systems. This has the added benefit of increasing a game's visibility by increasing the product line and building a vibrant community of players and designers.



WARNING

This doesn't mean you're free to simply take whatever you want from an existing TTRPG or put its logo on your work. Publishers invest in their intellectual property, and they have a right to protect it. If you're considering writing an adventure for an existing system, or adapting its rules for your own setting, *you* are responsible for researching the publisher's licensing agreement and abiding by its rules.

Some publishers, like Wizards of the Coast (WOTC), for example, have long protected specific words and creatures used in *Dungeons & Dragons*. The company also recently shifted from the OGL to a Creative Commons license. (See Chapter 2 for more information on licensing.)

Creators wanting to publish adventures for *Call of Cthulhu* must offer them through the Chaosium-approved Miskatonic Repository on the online publishing website DrivethruRPG. If you want to write an adventure for DCC, you need to contact Goodman Games for a licensing agreement first.



REMEMBER

Members of the TTRPG community generally support one another and recognize that a vibrant hobby filled with passionate fans helps all publishers. But it's still a business. You need to respect the rights of other creators and carefully follow whatever rules they've established for publishing related content. Read the licensing agreement, and do your research up front. Particularly in the case of popular TTRPGs, designers often share their experiences and advice in online forums, some hosted by the publishers themselves.

Making TTRPGs using existing rules systems is a helpful way to get started in game design. You know the mechanics are thoroughly tested, and you know you have a ready-made audience. Just remember: You're playing in someone else's sandbox, so play nice!

Pursuing a Hobby or Building a Business

People create TTRPGs for lots of reasons. Members of the Reacting Consortium (www.reactiving.barnard.edu) design games specifically for use in college classrooms, for example. Others create TTRPGs for specific training exercises or for use in therapy sessions. (See Chapter 2 for more information on the many applications of TTRPGs.)



TIP

The main question most people need to answer before embarking on designing TTRPGs is whether they're doing it primarily as a hobby or as a business. You can always do both, of course. In Gaming Honors, the company I'm part of, everyone has full-time day jobs. We make and sell TTRPGs because we love them. We cover our expenses and pay for our hobby, and that's enough for us.

Maybe you already know your Why when it comes to designing TTRPGs. Or maybe you picked up this book specifically for help with figuring out the best way forward for you.

Either way, you need to consider several important issues, and you've come to the right place!

Designing games for friends and fun

Even after 40 years, I love TTRPGs for the same reasons I did as a kid. They combine so many wonderful elements: imagination, creative writing, art, acting, and the chance to hang out with other creative people. (Okay, and nowadays also drink beer and eat junk food, but maybe that's just me.)

TTRPGs let you pursue all kinds of hobbies at your own pace and with a small group of friends. Even when you play games with strangers at your friendly local game store (FLGS) or at a convention, you can bet that you're sitting down with people who love expressing themselves through TTRPGs in much the same way you do.



TIP

You don't need to sell your TTRPG to make designing one deeply rewarding. Creating an entirely new world (covered in Chapter 5) is great fun. So is watching your friends wrestle with puzzles and challenges *you* invented. (Chapter 17 provides lots of advice for designing encounters players never forget.)

TTRPGs create shared memories unlike any other, and when you design the game or write the adventure, you're the one who made it happen. And that's super cool.

If you're primarily interested in designing games for your friends and for the fun of it, *you* decide how much time and money you want to invest in your TTRPG. For example, you may still want to hire freelance artists or mapmakers to bring your world to life, but you don't have to. (Chapter 21 goes into detail on working with freelancers.) And because you're likely the one running your game, you don't need to worry as much about proofreading and editing to ensure that other people know what you mean. (See Chapter 19 to learn more about the difference between proofreading and editing and why they matter.)



REMEMBER

But let me level with you: When you create a TTRPG or an adventure you love, eventually you want to share it with other people. It took years for my friends and me to decide we wanted other people to see the adventures we cooked up around our gaming table, but when crowdfunding and licensing made it possible, we jumped at the chance.

The line between designing a game for your friends and sharing it with a wider audience is finer than you think.

Welcoming everyone

TTRPGs are fundamentally social, although people also enjoy solo games, particularly because finding players and arranging schedules to get together has always been challenging. But even solo games are intended for players other than the designer.

You can't get around it: When you design a TTRPG, you invite others into your world.



REMEMBER

Deciding whether you're pursuing a hobby or building a business means understanding how players interact with your game and choosing how you guide that interaction.

When you design a game for friends, you usually travel alongside it. You're sitting right at the table, ready to explain to the players what you mean. And you probably know a lot about your friends going in. You may have a good idea of what makes them laugh and what makes them uncomfortable. And they know you.

None of these statements is true when you design a game for people you've never met. You need to help players know what they're getting into and help them have a good time, without knowing their pasts. Your words and rules need to be clear enough for people to understand without additional explanation from you.

And you need to cover your expenses!

No matter whom you design for, your game benefits from welcoming everyone to the table and helping them have fun. Now, to be clear, this doesn't mean you design your game *for* everyone. That's incredibly hard to do! Some people don't like science fiction games, for example, and some games have content that's appropriate only for mature players.



TIP

Welcoming everyone means providing players with the information they need to make their own decisions about whether your game is right for them. It also means knowing your own blind spots so that you're not unintentionally slamming the door on potential players or offending them without meaning to. (See Chapter 19 for information about hiring a sensitivity reader to check your work for subconscious bias.)

Welcoming everyone also requires providing tools that players and game masters (GMs) can use to ensure that everyone playing enjoys the experience. (Chapter 20 discusses safety tools you can incorporate into your game.)

The more welcoming your game is, the more likely players are to enjoy it and recommend it to other people. And that's critical if you hope to sell it.



REMEMBER

Being welcoming doesn't mean being generic or bland. It means being *deliberate* about the choices you make, particularly regarding potentially troubling content, and letting players know *in advance* what to expect. It means doing your best to put yourself in other people's shoes and seeing your game from their point of view.

Evaluating your risk tolerance

Designing a TTRPG always involves some risk. Even when you write an adventure for your friends, you're spending time and energy creating it without knowing what they'll think. Sharing your creations takes courage!

But writing a game and having your friends say "Meh" feels much different from doing lots of work, spending money on freelancers, publishing 1,000 copies of your new game, and having players you never met say "Meh." And leaving you with hurt feelings *and* 900 unsold copies sitting in your living room. (Before you get too worried, let me remind you that I've placed advice on handling the business side of things in Chapters 21 and 22.)



TIP

Before deciding whether to design TTRPGs to share with friends or as products to sell, think carefully about your risk tolerance. Consider the following guidelines before you dive in:

- » **The amount of disposable income you're willing and able to spend on your game:** Some designers have all the skills necessary to produce a TTRPG, from writing and editing to layout and art. (Chapter 21 discusses the many jobs that need to get done in making a TTRPG.) Most hire freelancers to complete at least some of these tasks. You also need to pay upfront to get the game printed, and you need to promote and sell it, which often involves travel and a web presence. Unless you do nearly all the work yourself, or use crowdfunding to cover the expenses, you should expect to spend at *least* \$2,000 to \$3,000 getting approximately 500 books into print. (Chapter 22 explores business expenses and crowdfunding in detail.) In assessing your risk tolerance, ask yourself whether you're okay with the possibility of not making this money back.
- » **Your enjoyment of TTRPG design for its own sake:** Designing a TTRPG requires a great deal of time with only modest promises of reward. If you design a game solely for the fun of it, or for your friends to enjoy, you're much more likely to feel good about the time you spend on it. If you'll be happy only if you turn a profit, however, you may be disappointed. Evaluate how much you enjoy the design process for its own sake before diving into trying to publish a game.
- » **Your comfort level with feedback and rejection:** When your friends play an adventure you wrote, they're likely to emphasize the positive when they're done. (If they don't, you might want to reevaluate your friendship!) When you create a game and sell it, customers don't always feel the need to be so polite. Any creative endeavor requires putting yourself out there, so you need to be comfortable with negative feedback and even with failure. Your crowdfunding campaign might not meet its goal, for example. Take time to assess how that prospect feels.



REMEMBER

You're free to set whatever goals you choose when it comes to designing TTRPGs. You can enjoy writing TTRPGs — and reading this book — without ever printing a single copy. But it's also quite exciting to design a game for others to enjoy. And you can do it! You just need to go into the process with your eyes open.

Traveling the convention circuit

TTRPGs bring people together, and not just in basements or game stores. Conventions now play a significant part in both the hobby and the industry, attracting players and publishers alike to cities large and small around the world. (See Chapters 22 and 23 for more information on the importance of conventions when it comes to promoting and selling games.)

Your TTRPG goals profoundly affect your relationship with conventions. For years, I attended conventions simply to play my favorite TTRPGs and try new ones. (Well, I also bought lots of games, too!)

That all changed when I started publishing adventure modules with Gaming Honors. Now, when I attend conventions, I largely focus on business. For example, we regularly sell our products in a booth at Gen Con, the largest tabletop game convention in North America. And though I still play games, I'm most often either playtesting a work in progress *or* running one of our company's games to introduce it to new players.

Don't get me wrong — it's still great fun, and I'm fortunate to be able to pursue TTRPG design as both a hobby and a business.

But going to conventions *changes* when you attend primarily to promote and sell your work. That's not something I thought much about when I started, so I'm glad I've been able to experience it as both a player and a vendor. If you've never gone to a tabletop or TTRPG convention, go and see what they're like. I'm sure you'll have fun, and, if you decide to publish your work, you'll probably go to plenty of them — though they won't be quite the same.

As you consider your personal and professional goals for TTRPG design, weigh the costs and benefits of making a pastime a profession.