For the Field

Roll for Initiative: A Librarian's Primer for Collecting Tabletop Role-Playing Games

When I was introduced to *Dungeons & Dragons* a few years ago, I found myself immediately enamoured with the game. I enjoyed role-playing my character, strategizing with my fellow adventurers, and imaging a world that we, as players, were creating. I am now a Game Master (GM) and in charge of creating worlds for our characters to explore. In my role as a reference specialist in an academic library, I have also built a board game collection and associated programming from the ground up. As a result of these endeavours (and extensive research), I have learned the value of gaming, particularly in education and library settings.

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) and board games are effective tools for providing patrons with rich and safe learning environments for developing a variety of social and technical skills, including critical thinking, empathy, self-awareness, teamwork, and spatial visualization. Despite the many positive attributes of TTRPGs, only one in ten libraries seem to carry these materials in their circulating collections (Schneider & Hutchinson, 2015). Libraries can capitalize on the benefits of TTRPGs and facilitate patron engagement by educating themselves on how to collect TTRPG materials for their libraries. This paper has been formulated as a toolkit that introduces TTRPG characteristics, suggests recommendations and best practices for libraries interested in collecting TTRPGs, and lists additional resources to further assist libraries in developing these collections.

Key Characteristics of Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Prior to curating a TTRPG collection, library staff should understand a few game basics, such as the categories and characteristics of TTRPGs (Table 1) and commonly used dice mechanics, as these affect library collection management efforts.

Table 1: Two most common types of TTRPGs

Rule-Intensive TTRPGs	Rules-Light TTRPGs
▪ Expensive, requires multiple rulebooks and/or supplements; ▪ Rules are complex and numerous; ▪ Steep but rewarding learning curve for players and GMs (Sich, 2012; Snow, 2009); ▪ Preference for statistics and combat over storytelling and role-playing (Sich, 2012; Snow, 2009); ▪ Rich settings and numerous rules provide great depth; ▪ Best suited for players and library staff who have more experience with TTRPGs (Sich, 2012).	▪ Accessible and inexpensive (Sich, 2012); ▪ Emphasis on storytelling and role-playing over an extensive number of rules and statistics (Sich, 2012; Snow, 2008; Snow, 2009); ▪ Fewer complex game mechanics; more room for improvisation (Sich, 2012, p. 64); ▪ Emphasizes group storytelling, cooperation, and trust among players (Snow, 2008); ▪ Great for younger players and groups of varying sizes (Sich, 2012).

The purpose of dice is to add unpredictability to the game. There are two main categories of dice mechanics: static die and dice pools.

Static Die Systems

- Use the same die for rolls while adding flat bonuses and penalties to die results, which are usually located on a player's character sheet.
- The d20 (twenty-sided die) system used in *Dungeons & Dragons* is the most common static die system, which relies on rolling a d20 and adding modifiers to perform ability checks. Another common system is d100 or d% (percentile), which is used in *Basic Roleplaying* and *Call of Cthulhu*.

Dice Pool Systems

- Involves rolling a number of dice as determined by a character's statistics, called a "pool." Two types of dice pools exist: additive-based and success-based.
- Additive-based dice pool systems allow players to roll a pool of dice and add the results together, which are compared to a target to determine success. This system allows for greater control of character abilities but is more difficult to calculate, particularly at higher levels.
- In success-based systems, players are given certain values that each of their dice must meet to be considered a success. This system is easier to calculate as it requires less addition.

Recommendations & Best Practices

With a basic understanding of the types of TTRPGs available, this section will outline recommendations and best practices for creating and enhancing a library's TTRPG collection.

Initial Considerations

- Ensure that appropriate collection development policies are in place, including procedures for handling challenges to materials (Torres-Roman & Snow, 2014), and assigning a collections budget according to the size of the library (see Table 2 for suggestions based on library size).

Table 2: Collection Budgets

Library Size	# of Patrons	Estimated Budget
Small-sized	< 5,000 patrons	\$200.00 USD
Medium-sized	< 150,000 patrons	\$1,000.00 USD
Large-sized	> 150,000 patrons	\$5,000.00 USD

(Torres-Roman & Snow, 2014)

- Core rulebooks are the bare minimum required to create a TTRPG collection; however, some game systems require additional rulebooks and supplemental materials. *Dungeons & Dragons* is one such example, as the publisher continually releases supplemental materials (e.g., settings, pre-made adventures, rules).
- Consider supplying blank character sheets, dice sets, and GM screens for patron use.
- Libraries with access to makerspaces may be at liberty to create their own game materials (e.g., 3D-printed miniatures and terrain).

With so many games available on the market, librarians may need to do some research to determine which titles will suit their library population best:

- Local TTRPG groups can provide first-hand reviews of TTRPGs (Sich, 2012). These groups are useful for forming partnerships, including promotion of library TTRPG programs and volunteer recruitment (Sich, 2012).
- Similar to TTRPG groups, Friendly Local Game Stores (FLGS) are willing to answer questions about particular TTRPGs and may allow library staff to test out games prior to purchase.
- Email newsletters and review websites are also useful tools for keeping up to date with upcoming games and editions, errata, supplementary materials, news, and crowdfunding opportunities (Sich, 2012). Review websites, such as RPG Geek or RPG.net, are useful for developing an understanding of different settings

and mechanics of TTRPGs, while also encouraging community discussion (see *Appendix A: Additional Resources*).

Making Space for TTRPG Collections

- If a TTRPG collection is circulating, materials should be displayed in prominent areas of the library where they are readily visible to patrons, such as near teen collections (Torres-Roman & Snow, 2014).
- Librarians may also consider creating an area dedicated solely to TTRPG materials. These items should also be displayed so that the cover art entices patrons to interact with the materials.
- If a collection contains non-circulating materials, such as boxed sets consisting of many small pieces, these may be kept at the circulation desk to prevent theft or vandalism (Torres-Roman & Snow, 2014). Furthermore, the library may display images and information about these materials within the library with access instructions in order to generate awareness and promote use.

Deciding Which TTRPGs to Collect

- Consider collecting game materials from a variety of different genres (e.g., fantasy, science fiction, horror). This collection should be well-balanced in complexity, including a combination of rule-intensive and rules-light games to suit a wide audience (see *Appendix B: Selected Titles for suggestions*).
- Universal TTRPG systems consist of essential game mechanics and character creation that can be applied to any genre, which make them great candidates for a library collection. Common examples include *Fate*, *GURPS*, and *Basic Roleplaying*. Also note that the open game license (OGL) of the d20 system

allows for multiple settings using the same ruleset (e.g., *Esper Genesis*, *Adventures in Middle Earth*).

- Consider collecting games that are based on popular fandoms, such as *Star Trek: The Role Playing Game*, *Star Wars: Edge of the Empire*, *Doctor Who: Adventures in Time and Space*, and *The Expanse Roleplaying Game*. This helps to create patron interest in TTRPGs, especially if the patrons are new to the format.

Copyright & Compatibility Issues

- Due to copyright concerns, librarians are encouraged to collect physical editions of TTRPG material. PDFs are a grey area as they are meant to be licensed for individual users, namely the purchaser, unless otherwise noted (Sich, 2012, p. 61).
- However, free and quick start PDFs are a great way to introduce a game to a collection for little-to-no cost. Quick starts are slimmed down versions of full systems, often containing only essential rules often found in the OGL, or in the case of d20 systems like *Dungeons & Dragons*, the system reference document (SRD). These are useful for introducing new games prior to purchasing full systems.
- Be aware of TTRPGs that come in multiple editions (e.g., *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, *Call of Cthulhu*), as compatibility issues usually exist between editions. Many game publishers will release new editions of a game to entice players to purchase the game system again; however, documents often exist to assist in converting one edition of a game to the latest.

Conclusion

Although there are many benefits to collecting TTRPG materials, few libraries currently provide such materials in their circulating collections. Libraries can capitalize on the benefits of TTRPGs by educating themselves on how to collect these materials for their libraries. By examining core TTRPG game mechanics, library collection budgets and policies, spatial considerations, and copyright and compatibility issues, this toolkit has provided the necessary information that libraries require for selecting appropriate TTRPGs for a library's collection.

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Forsythe, C. (2020). Roll for initiative: A librarian's primer for collecting tabletop role-playing games. *Emerging Library & Information Perspectives*, 3, 187-198.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Additional Resources

PDF & Print-on-Demand TTRPGs

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

DriveThruRPG is the largest RPG download store that carries a wide variety of watermarked PDF and print-on-demand popular, indie, free, and quick start RPG materials.

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

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

Dungeon Master's Guild (<https://www.dmsguild.com/>)

The Dungeon Master's Guild is a great resource for finding supplementary materials and adventures for *Dungeons & Dragons* in a variety of editions and play styles (including *Adventurers League*).

News & Community Sites

RPG Geek (<https://rpggeek.com/>)

RPG Geek publishes news, game information, and reviews, and provides a forum to encourage player discussion.

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

RPG.net contains a game index and is a great resource for finding reviews.

Author's Website

Roll for Initiative (<http://publish.uwo.ca/~cforsyt9/siteroot/>)

This website was created by the author based on her research about all things TTRPG. Some content from this website formed the basis of this paper.

Appendix B: Selected Titles

Rule-Intensive Games

Dungeons & Dragons (5e) is the latest edition of the popular TTRPG by publisher Wizards of the Coast. The game is set primarily in fantasy worlds and uses a d20, roll-high mechanic. At minimum, libraries should consider carrying the *Player's Handbook*; however, for more depth, libraries may consider carrying the *Dungeons Master's Guide* and *Monster Manual*. If you want to try this game before purchasing, you can access the *Basic Rules* in free PDF format or a starter kit. Wizards of the Coast has also released many of the game's rules as an OGL, allowing other game publishers and individuals to use these base rules for their own settings (e.g., *Esper Genesis*).

Call of Cthulhu (7e) is the latest edition of the first horror, investigation TTRPG based on the works of H. P. Lovecraft. The game mechanics are easy to learn as they are based off Chaosium's *Basic Roleplaying* and use a simple roll-low, percentile-based system. Since the game has been around for several decades, there are many resources and adventures available. Librarians may collect the core rulebooks (*Investigator Handbook and Keeper Rulebook*). Alternatively, the *Starter Set* is a great way to introduce the game to a collection, as is the free *Quick Start Rules*.

GURPS, or *Generic Universal RolePlaying System*, is a universal 3d6 success-based TTRPG created by Steve Jackson Games. *GURPS* focuses on simple rules that easily apply to any setting. Steve Jackson Games has also released *GURPS Lite*, a free

quick start rules PDF, as well as [Warehouse 23](#), an online store dedicated to all things Steve Jackson Games.

Burning Wheel is a fantasy TTRPG developed by Luke Crane that uses a d6 dice pool mechanic. Although the core game elements may be considered fantasy, this is another universal system that may be applied or modified to suit many different settings. Libraries should consider collecting *The Burning Wheel*, which contains rules and mechanics, as well as the *Character Burner*, which provides additional character mechanics. Although *Burning Wheel* is considered rules-intensive, it shares many elements of rules-light games, particularly in telling the story and motivations of player characters, as well as its promotion of cooperation between players.

Rules-Light Games

Dungeon World is an indie TTRPG reminiscent of classic high fantasy games and uses the *Apocalypse World* system where players roll 2d6 and add ability modifiers to determine success. Gameplay in *Dungeon World* is built to ensure that action is always moving forward and that players are not bogged down by rules.

Basic Roleplaying is purposely built without a setting so GMs are encouraged to adapt the rules to suit any genre. *Basic Roleplaying* operates using an easy-to-use percentile, roll-low system and comes with a modular set of rules that can be used or altered to suit the preferences of gaming groups. To try this game, Chaosium has created a free, quick start PDF.

Tiny Dungeon (2e) uses the TinyD6 Engine, which consists of players rolling one-to-three d6 die/dice to determine the success or failure of player actions. *Tiny Dungeon* also comes with a variety of open-ended micro-settings for players to explore;

however, GMs are still required to create actual adventures for players. Librarians may choose to collect this game system for its versatility, simplicity, and emphasis on role-playing.

Fate Core System, derived from *Fudge*, is a universal TTRPG that requires fewer dice rolls and involves more improvising on the part of the players and GM. *Fate* uses semi-proprietary dice (Fate Dice), but also allows players to substitute with regular d6 dice or a deck of cards. For a simpler version of the *Fate Core System*, librarians may want to try *Fate Accelerated*, which is available for free or pay-what-you-want.