

# A Basic Guide to Indie RPG Design

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This document is a five page treatise on design for RPG's. This should give an amateur designer all they need to begin creating their own role-playing game, no matter the genre or style.

# Basics of Design

Role-playing games are a number of things. They serve the purpose of entertainment, educational tool, story-telling device, and social medium. Thus, designing a role-playing game must facilitate all of these things in some way. This is not an easy task, especially for amateur designers. To answer some of the many questions you might have, you must first understand what designing a game really means.

## Defining Your Design

Design refers to the planning, thought, and intention that contributes to a particular creation or action. Unpack that a little more, and it refers to forethought in every action and consideration of every facet. What this means for your design is something integral to all parts of the process, purpose. Make every word of a game, every sentence and chapter, and all of those circles on a character sheet mean something. Ask yourself before you write anything new, “What is this doing?” This includes the time before you even draft the first word. Define to yourself what it is you want to do, and once you know that you can define it to your readers through text.

Consult the opening of the role-playing game *The Burning Wheel* by esteemed designer Luke Crane for an example of crisp and evocative game writing.

*“So how do you play Burning Wheel? Fight for what you believe. Or, since it’s a roleplaying game: Fight for what your character believes. Everything else in the rules tells either how to craft that character’s beliefs or how to fight for them.”<sup>1</sup>*

Crane defines what his game wants to do and clearly explains that to the reader. Do this in every piece of writing and design. Be this clear in your design goals, make sure that all parts of the game either follow or strengthen your goals, and write in a way that tells your readers what your goals are, and the entire design process will flow naturally.

## The Four Questions

Ask yourself these 4 questions of your game design idea before you begin the long process of actually putting words to paper.

1. Does this game idea seem fun to me?
2. Who would play this game other than me?
3. Does this game do anything I haven’t seen before?
4. What does this game REALLY do?

You cannot design a game meaningfully if you do not find it fun. You won’t find it fun to playtest if you don’t like the game in the first. Make games you want to play because enthusiasm translates directly to longevity and perseverance. Be sure that others will want to play the game as well, but rest assured, you will find that no matter what game you make there will be someone who wants to play it. Find out who those people are and target your game toward them. Next, make your game to be novel and new in some way. Don’t think you need a groundbreaking dice mechanic to achieve this. If no other game gives the feel you want, that’s reason enough to make your own game. Finally, understand what your game really does. This may not come to you until after you have run playtests, but this question needs to be answered. Ensure that your design reflects your desires. Ensure you do not lose your way, and if you do, reevaluate where you are and possibly redirect your design. Rewrites and scraps of paper are very common. Don’t be scared of having second thoughts about anything.

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<sup>1</sup> BURNING WHEEL GOLD, PG 6

# The Role in Role-Playing Game

## Role-Playing Games vs. Just Games

An explicit expectation of a roleplaying game is in the name, a “role.” Defining roles in roleplaying games is not easy, but it comes down to care and human emotion. The people playing the game need to care about the roles they take within the game. No, this does not refer to an explicit focus on “storytelling mechanics” like so many new games love to claim. This does not exclude combat mechanics or a 20-sided die focused game. People care about different things and they find enjoyment in different ways. Your game cannot play to every scenario and every set of tastes. Find what you like, and design around that. *Dungeons and Dragons* does not fail in this regard just because it focuses on turn-based combat or level-based class-driven advancement. In fact, the very process of watching a character grow into something better and then putting those advancements to direct use in combat draws investment from players. Be aware of how you make your players care about the game. Give your game longevity and playability by making players emotionally invest.

## Making Players Care

The *Complete Kobold Guide to Game Design* states in the first chapter that: “Design is a bit like mind control”<sup>2</sup> Consider your words as window into your ideas. Each mechanic you include provides insight into what you want the game to do, and in turn you guide your players to thinking in a certain way. Use this to separate your game from other games of its kind. Writing a section on magical powers of earth-shattering capabilities requires you use earth-shattering language. Use heavy sounding words and language that evokes a feeling of power. Creating a social damage mechanic that is supposed to emphasize desperate deals in the dark might have some sort of physical toll on characters that makes them tired and emotional. Make your game make sense. Unravel its design, show your readers its intricacies, and give it the language it deserves.

## The Tyranny of Story

No game is without a story. However, it is not an all-important mission to make the story the first and only. Ask the real and pressing question, “Does this story reinforce the role I want my players to play?” If you cannot answer that question with a yes, then seriously reconsider including this bit of story. Don’t get so hung up on adding to your story and to your lore that you lose the essence of what the story is meant to serve. The story serves the game, it emphasizes aspects of the game, because they contribute to a greater whole.

Likewise, while considering what you should include in your story, you must also consider *how* you wish to include that story. Assuming that your story text is important and necessary, you then need to write in such a way as to accurately convey your thoughts. Word choice is paramount in this endeavor. Your choice of language can evoke the perfect emotions in your readers that perfectly amplify the mood, or they can break your reader from their investment in the game. Never break your readers from the game, you only get a couple of chances at engaging your readers before they will not become engaged again.

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<sup>2</sup> KOBOLD GUIDE, PG 6

# The Game in Role-Playing Game

## What are Your Mechanics?

Mechanics evoke images of grinding cogs and squealing belts, and that image is not entirely wrong. The mechanics of your game are those things that work to make the game a thing to interact with. Make your mechanics clear and then clearly explain them to the reader. Your mechanics are central to your game, so be sure of how they work and what purpose they serve.

## Mechanics and Story Together

Amateur designers often begin a game design concept with a mechanic first. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it must be treated with some care. Story and mechanics work together to create a greater whole. Don't focus on designing clever mechanics if they do not reinforce the story and design goals. What does using this mechanic feel like? Does this feel good to use? Is that feeling what I wanted it to feel like? Review the original purpose for the game, and any changing design goals. Draw players in and make them invest by designing clever mechanics that mesh with each other and with the story.

This however, is where professional and amateur game design differ. Indie game design often answers the questions that individual players, and the designer himself wants to answer. They scratch the itch of a specific group of gamers that the designer belongs to. This is fine, the designer understands his audience. Professional designers, however, design with abstraction toward an audience of which they may not be a member. Do not be concerned so much with thinking how others will like a mechanic, you are an indie designer. Love your game and make it fun for you, playtesting will show you if mechanics truly will not work.

## Originality is Not Important

It is a common statement in the creative arts that "nothing is original." This is partially true, and partially false. Creating an original mechanic can make your game stand out among others, but don't make something so complicated it's unusable. Originality can come in the form of a unique blending of certain mechanics and story that no one else has done. You can be original in just making minor changes to other mechanics, or even just using another game's mechanics and putting them to use in a new way. Using a 20-sided die is good, as long as you don't copy the text of the *Dungeons and Dragons Players Handbook* wholesale. Don't worry about copyright too much at this point either, just don't plagiarize exact text from published material.

If you want to create an original mechanic in your game, you need to put thought into it. Ask yourself these two questions:

1. Can I do this same thing with an already existing mechanic?
2. Does this mechanic connect with other mechanics in my game?

The second question is very important. Your mechanics have to work with each other. The intermingling of mechanics make a game move smoothly and is the hallmark of good game design.

## Your Secret Ally

The final thing you need to recognize about your mechanics is that you have a secret ally in this, the game master. They will interpret your rules and move them around as needed. Make your rules easy to move and understand. Make your game easy to modify and quick to learn, these things help the game masters of the future facilitate fun gameplay.

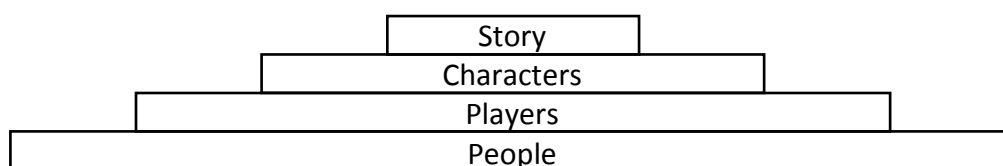
# The Play in Role-Playing Game

## Where Are the People?

There is one important thing that you may have forgotten in this whole design process: the people. Do not confuse “people” with “players”. “People” refers to the actual human beings around the table, or perhaps across the computer screen. The game is a game first and foremost, and the people of the game are there because they want to have fun playing the game. Design with this in mind. Look no further than the popular disaster of game design known as FATAL (Fantasy Adventure to Adult Lechery). FATAL is almost a joke of design in how uncomfortable it is to play. The game ignores something very important, the people. It does what it’s supposed to do, the mechanics and story interplay well for its purpose, but the game itself is uncomfortable to play. The people at the table are made uncomfortable by the very mechanics of the game. Avoid at all costs. Be aware of how your game affects the people at the table, nothing can kill a game quicker than offending your players.

## The Hierarchy of Sin in Game Design

There is a more concrete rule to consider when judging if any mechanic sins too badly to be added to the game.



The story is the least important part of a game. Never sacrifice good opportunities for characters to put your story in its place within reason. Story points will always exclude character concepts, but don’t do it very often.

Next, do not consider the story or characters over the players at the table. A mechanic or piece of story that tries to engage characters or create an interesting story is not important if it does not engage the players as people playing a game. If something is not fun, that is all you need to remove it from the game.

Finally, never sacrifice the people at the table for anything with the game. Be careful about how your game affects the people around the table as people. Immediately remove anything wildly offensive or could act as a traumatic trigger, no matter how fun you find it to be.

## The Cost of Playing

The more you make your players pay to play your game, the less success it will have. For anyone who is not *Wizards of the Coast* this is almost always true. Playing a game costs money, and it costs time. Players will have to pay to play your game. Some games try to lower the cost of entry to as small as possible by using simple dice mechanics that limit the physical interaction sphere. Some games instead go “diceless” in an attempt to make the game a no-cost entry. Designers publish online PDF’s instead of hardback books, they use cheaper materials, etc. Design your game to meet the expected cost of entry you desire. Keep a note on how many materials your game requires to run effectively. Emphasize in your text what materials are necessary and what players can go without. Consider the time investment, and perhaps redesign mechanics or rewrite chapters that run too long or take too much effort. Concise and clear expectations are the most important aspects of this process, don’t lie to yourself and don’t lie to your readers.

## The Other Considerations

### Infinite Opinions

You will encounter infinite opinions while designing your game. It is important that you take these things in consideration, but to be wary of specific advice by those who do not know your game.

Gather around yourself people who are interested in the game, and are willing to play it with you. Playtesting in this way is incredibly important, and the infinite opinions from everyone who doesn't know you and your game can be distilled into the educated and experienced opinions of those who know something about what you need.

### Playtest, Playtest, Playtest

Put your game to the test. No engineer worth their salt will put a design into production without heavy testing. Regulatory agencies in every industry require major testing on products before they can be put onto the market. This is just as important for games. Modify or remove frustrating mechanics quickly. Change something if the game doesn't engage players in the way you wanted. Never put a product on the market without playtesting it.

Luckily, if you have friends who like role-playing games, you have a ready supply of willing guinea pigs. These people already like you for you, and they'll be more inclined to not only entertain your game, but also to be more honest with criticism. Once your design is steady enough to satisfy your personal friends, find some strangers and get them to play it. They will not be as nice with criticism, and some may find it uncomfortable, but you will receive a true and honest opinion on the games design from a potential customer's perspective. Playtest your game, it is the most important part of the design process.

### Layout, Design, and Art

The design of your final document is vitally important in creating a first impression. The artistic layout can draw a reader's eye to the correct box or paragraph in an instant. Evocative art pieces can illustrate your story in ways words never can. Hire a professional layout designer, hire an editor, and commission good art. Do not be cheap on this, cheap shows.

## In Conclusion

Design your game with forethought and care. Explain your goals back to yourself for clarity, and write them down. Keep notes on new ideas and discuss them with others. Follow a clear and logical design path, and do not become distracted. Work on one thing at a time, don't start multiple projects and expect to finish any of them. Ask for help online when you are stuck, and implement that help meaningfully. Read other games for inspiration, don't go into a design without knowing some common pitfalls to avoid. Focus your game on what you like, don't try to be a professional. Talk to your friends about the game and get them excited, they'll be more enthusiastic in playtest. Never become angry or depressed when your prized mechanic has to be left behind. Become friends with the employees at a local coffee shop, you'll probably be there quite often.

Now go make your game!