



# WRITING GAMES FOR PUBLICATION



by Monte Cook

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These games we play don't write themselves! Maybe you should do it. Since gaming is such an inherently creative hobby, most GMs—and many players—think about getting their own material published. Maybe it's a great adventure that they and their group loved. Maybe it's a character who is really special. Maybe it's a whole new RPG system. Or maybe the specifics aren't driving the issue, but just the general idea of being a professional game designer. I mean, you just get to play games all day if you're a game designer right? (Spoiler: you don't.)

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I can remember when I was about 14 years old and I saw the D&D module, *Dwellers of the Forbidden City*, on the store shelf. It was by David Cook, and I noticed the name because, well, that's my last name too. This was a significant event for me, because it was the first moment that I thought, "Hey, it's someone's job to write this stuff." This was followed closely by the thought, "I want that to be *my* job!"

How to write for games, and how to get your game writing work published could be its own entire book. I wanted to include as much information on this topic as possible in *Your Best Game Ever*, but we literally ran out of space packing that book with advice and ideas for game players and game masters. So we took the content we would have put in the book and pulled it together here, and made it free for everyone to read.

## HOW I GOT MY START

Since I get asked this all the time, let's get "story time" out of the way first.

My friend Steve went to the Origins Game Fair while we were in still in college, about 1988. At the time, we played Rolemaster, a fantasy game by Iron Crown Enterprises (ICE). At the con, Steve went to the ICE booth and spoke to the people there. They told him they were looking for a monster book and gave him a set of their writer's guidelines.

He brought that information back to me and encouraged me to go for it. I wrote up a proposal and to my surprise, about a month later, an editor at ICE called me and said that they were interested.

So I wrote *Creatures and Treasures II*, a sourcebook for Rolemaster. When the book was done and ICE's editors were through with it (my editor was Kevin Barrett, who eventually became a good friend), I sent ICE a letter proposing more work I could do. More product ideas I had. They liked one of them and told me to go ahead and write it. This time, it was a Rolemaster/Space Master crossover product called *Dark Space*.



When I graduated college, I wrote to ICE again and ask if I could have a job. They said that they had a summer internship position open. So for a summer I did all the stuff that no one else wanted to do at ICE. But I worked hard, got paid practically nothing, and strove to make myself indispensable. It must have worked, because that fall I got an offer to stay on full time. A few years later I left to write freelance, but eventually ended up working for TSR. TSR was bought by Wizards of the Coast a few years after that, and eventually I left Wizards to start my own company, Malhavoc Press, to produce d20 (D&D compatible) material. Later, I started Monte Cook Games so I could produce games like Numenera, the Cypher System, No Thank You Evil!, and Invisible Sun.

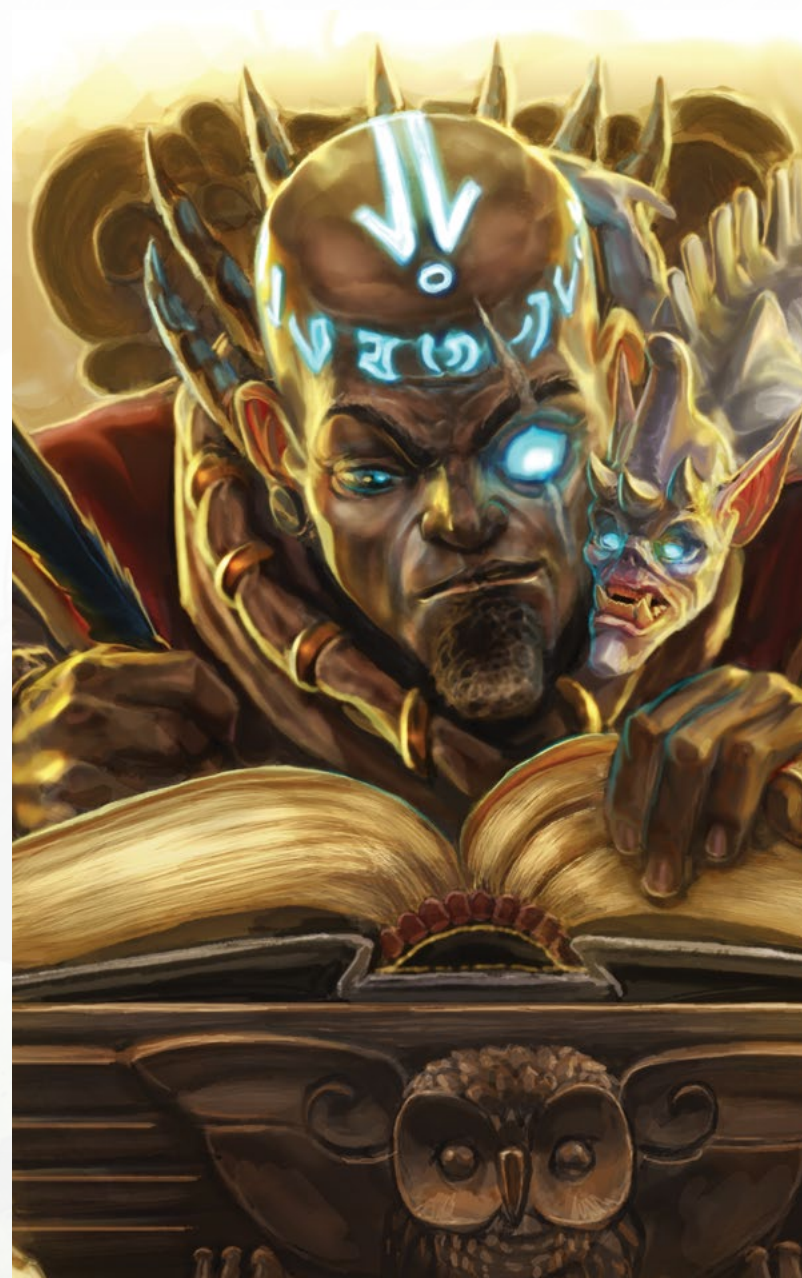
I think at the beginning I was just a guy with creative ideas, basic writing skills, and a deep passion for games. Somewhere along the line (I hope), I got a lot better at both game design and writing for publication.

Was it hard? I have no idea. I don't have anything to compare it to because I've never broken into any other field. It was easier, I guess, to get my first game product published than it was to get my first novel published, but only a little.

## WRITING LIKE A PRO

If you want to learn writing basics, you can find any number of helpful books or websites on grammar, writing well, and so on. So let's focus on writing for games. There's lots of kinds of game writing—rules, adventures, setting material, NPCs, monsters, magic items. . .the list goes on. And they all have their own idiosyncrasies. What's more, every game ruleset is different, and every publisher is different, so that changes things too.

So let's consider just some general advice that applies to almost all game writing.



When writing game products, imagine yourself at the table—both as the GM and the player—so you’re always aware of who needs to know what information and when they need to know it. This kind of information empathy is one of your greatest tools as a writer.

—Shanna Germain

### WRITE TO YOUR AUDIENCE

Unless you’re specifically writing about creating or running characters, you’re writing for the GM. The GM is your ally here, or rather, you’re meant to be *their* ally. Don’t keep secrets from them. Don’t be coy. If you’re writing an adventure, they need to know up front what happens. Don’t tantalize—inform. (This is essentially the opposite of writing fiction.)

Let’s expand on that further, in fact. Writing an RPG book is not like writing a novel or a short story. You’re not the storyteller. The gamers at the table tell the stories. You just empower them. You know, let me say that again because the point is too important to miss: you are not the storyteller. Storytellers create characters and plots. But in an RPG, the players create the characters, and they decide what to do—which is basically the plot. At most, you might create a setting and situations. Or maybe the rules that govern how things get done. But they’re creating the story. You’re creating the tools to help them. If we were talking about building a house, the game writer is not the house builder in the analogy, they’re the person providing the lumber, the hammers, the nails, and so on.

### CLARITY IS VITAL

While clarity is important in all writing, game writing is more like technical writing than creative writing. That means that it can be more like writing instructions for a blender than like writing a short story. That makes it sound pretty awful, though, I suppose. But if you think of it as a magic



blender that can make smoothies for the crew of a starship chased by Cthulhu spawn. Does that make it better? Because that’s actually what it’s kind of like. You’re taking fun, imaginative ideas—sometimes outlandishly wacky ideas—and making them clear and understandable.

Clarity comes from putting your important points in small, consumable chunks. For example, bullet points are easy to understand, read, and refer back to. But even if the material doesn’t fit into one-sentence bullets, or even sentence fragment bullets, consider dividing it into sections with headers. Pages and pages of text is great for a novel, but it’s hell if you want to look back and reference a rule. It’s also been shown that it’s hard to learn from so called “walls of text.” They can be seen as impenetrable and daunting, and you want your writing to be welcoming and digestible.

Consider the order in which you’re presenting your information. In pretty much every case, write the most interesting bit first. If you’re making a new monster, and you start with a paragraph about its dietary needs and how it fits into the ecosystem, and only later do I discover that it can blast purple lightning from its eyes that transforms other creatures into clouds of poison gas, you’ve probably made a miscalculation. To use a journalism axiom, “Don’t bury the lede.” Put the most important and most interesting material up front. Mundane details don’t tell the GM that they want to put this creature in their next adventure, and that’s precisely what the first thing you tell them should



do. Your first sentence, paragraph, or section (depending on what you're writing) should scream: "Your character/adventure/setting/campaign/NPC absolutely needs this new thing and here's why!"

At the same time, you've got to present the information in a way that the reader can follow. Rules and important information are best explained in short, blunt sentences. (Flavorful material can use more complex language if you want.) One point should lead to the next, and—if you're dealing with a complex topic—you should provide the reader a sort of roadmap of where you're going before you go there.

You don't want to obfuscate the important takeaway in the middle of a paragraph. Not only are your readers likely to miss it, but even if they do read it, they're going to have a difficult time referring back to it in the middle of a game.

Rambling interjections or preambles, no matter how clever, hide your ideas rather than showcase them. Again, being clear and straightforward is the way to go. Tell the reader right away not just what they need to know but why they're going to care. If you're writing a character ability called "Make Everything Dangerous," that allows a character to make use of improvised weapons, start out not only by telling the player that, but why they would care. "Even the most skilled fighter finds themselves unarmed sometimes. Make Everything Dangerous allows the character to wield any object they can heft as if it were a weapon." . . . and then get into the game specifics. With those first two sentences, you've told the reader what kind of character would find this ability useful, and why. It's compelling without being too wordy, and it provides a general signal of what's coming before you dive into details.

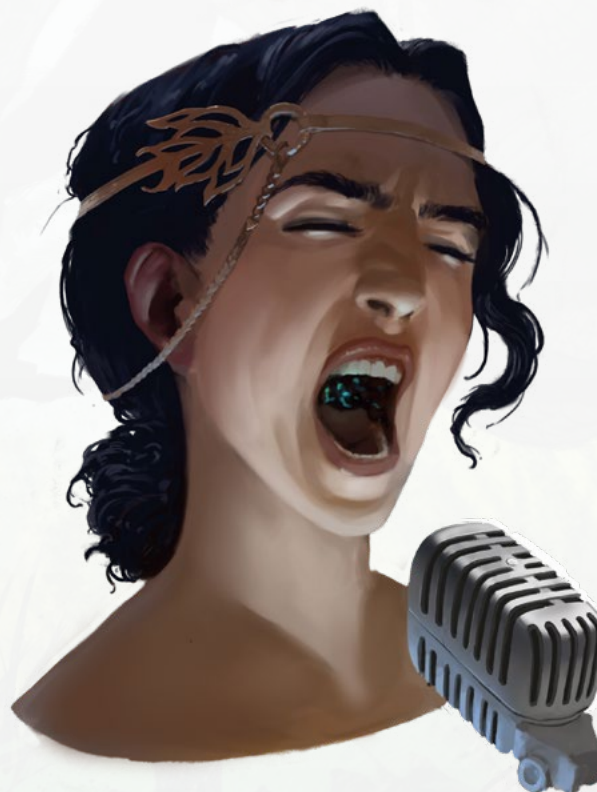
### THINK ABOUT VOICE

What you're reading now, like the entirety of *Your Best Game Ever*, is written in a very conversational style. It's (hopefully) fun to read without sacrificing clarity. You can write game material in a conversational style, but consider the actual material you're working on. If it's a modern game or something similar, that style might be a great choice. But if you're

working on a game that's about medieval knights or samurai warriors, maybe a different voice or tone would be more appropriate.

Really great game writing is immersive. Voice—literally how you write the descriptions of the things you're working with—is a masterful way of creating immersion without being blatant. If the game you're working on is mysterious, strange, and even poetic, your writing can take on a bit of that flair as well. A science fiction game might be more technical or scientific. A game about faeries should probably be filled with magic and wonder in the words and sentences it uses to describe the magic and the wonder of the setting.

Now, as you're thinking about voice, don't forget the previous point. Voice isn't an excuse for you to neglect clarity. You need to marry those two concepts together and create something interesting to read while still getting the information across.



Once you sit down to actually write your game product, the scope of it might seem overwhelming if considered in its entirety. So don't! Do what I do, which is to take an hour or so to figure out how many words (or pages) I need to write each day to reach a deadline that lies a few weeks or months in the future. Then I just work to that much smaller daily deadline. Each time I meet one of these tiny milestones, I note it in a progress journal of some kind. This demonstrates that I'm that much closer to successfully completing my project, and alleviates any anxiety I might have about failing to get the thing finished on time.

—Bruce R. Cordell

## EXAMPLES ARE ALWAYS A GOOD THING

When you write game material, you're very likely writing something that the reader will learn from, and something they will refer to again and again. This is a challenge, because to teach someone something (like a game rule) you need to explain it carefully in a way they'll understand and remember. To create an easy reference, you want it straightforward and easy to find without a lot of explanation. Those two things seem in conflict, right? Examples are a great way around this. If you provide an example, it's a really great way to get someone to understand something. Most people learn something better that way than just through a blanket statement of fact.

At the same time, as readers, if we're referencing something for the second (or ninth) time, our minds learn to just skip the example and look to the heart of the issue. That's just the way we read. In other words, if you're writing a new rule, write something very straightforward with few details, add an example showing the rule in play, and then

follow the example with necessary follow-up details. So, the next part of our Make Everything Dangerous ability might *not* be the game specifics, but an example:

**Make Everything Dangerous:** *Even the most skilled fighter finds themselves unarmed sometimes. Make Everything Dangerous allows the character to wield any object they can heft as if it were a weapon.*

*For example, Eveline finds herself disarmed by the flourish of a skilled foe's blade. Using Make Everything Dangerous, Eveline simply grabs a candlestick off the shelf she's standing next to, and without missing a beat is back in the fight.*

And then we give the specific mechanics, starting with a new line break.

## REVISE AND PRUNE YOUR WORDS

In the example of Make Everything Dangerous, when we look at it again, we realize that you could actually *start* with the example, because it's so clear that it almost makes the first couple of sentences unnecessary. Cut them entirely and just have the example and then the rules. Good rules writing almost always requires that kind of excessive pruning and reworking to get it to be as clear and concise as possible. Trim things down so that there's nothing extraneous or redundant.

Redundancy in game writing is a common mistake I see. Compare these two bits of text:

“On their turn, the cyborg targets a foe with their laser lance. The target must be within medium range. If the cyborg successfully strikes their foe, the laser lance inflicts 6 points of damage.”

Versus

“The cyborg uses their laser lance to attack a foe in medium range, inflicting 6 points of damage.”



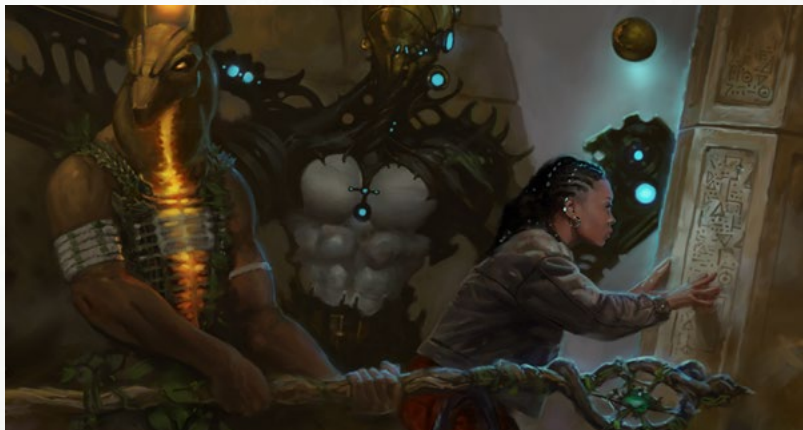
By making the second example more concise, we also make it clearer. It's not just shorter, it's easier to understand.

## PLAYTEST

Game material that's meant for publication should always first be something you test in your own game (or in a specific playtest game). What's fun for you and your friends is likely to be fun for others. Playtesting will help you find the flaws in your ideas, and—more importantly—expose you to how players and GMs will use the material you've created, and what they will need in order to do so.

Sometimes the best game material *starts* as something you created for your home game. You very likely created it because there wasn't anything available like it. You were filling a need. And if your campaign had that need, someone else's probably will too. But this origin isn't really playtesting.

For a playtest, if at all possible, you—the writer—should not be the GM. Real playtesting comes after you've written a draft of your material. The best test is to give your material to someone else and see if they can run a game using it. As the writer, you'll naturally fill in any gaps in the material because you already know the intent. But another GM only has the words you've put on the page, just like the ultimate end user.



## CONSIDER EVERYTHING THAT'S NEEDED

You can often tell right away if a game writer is also an avid game player. And the way you can tell they are is when the material really provides everything that's needed at the table. Consider the ways what you're creating might get used in the game, not just the way you envision it. Let's say you've made a new magic item for a fantasy game and it's a sword that gets more powerful as you get weaker, so that the mighty warrior's blade will be at its strongest when they've been fighting a truly terrible foe. Cool idea, but there are at least two very odd potential consequences:

1. The sword wielder might actually try to hurt themselves, or ask their allies to hurt them, so the sword will be more potent.
2. The sword, when found by the PCs, might not go to the warrior at all. If it's more powerful when the wielder is weaker, maybe it should go to the bookish, feeble wizard instead.

Neither of those is what you envisioned. But your vision doesn't matter. You're not the storyteller, remember? The players and GM tell the story. So you've got to present your idea in such a way that anticipates the various ways things can go at the table. For example, when you're designing the abilities of a monster the PCs may fight, don't say something like "this monster's fiery aura can inflict 10 points of damage on PCs each round," because what if an NPC is within that aura? Are they immune? Of course not, but just because your vision was of the PCs facing off against the monster doesn't mean that's the way it will go. Instead, consider words like characters, people, or living things.

Consider what the people at the table need to know. Since you're probably writing for a GM, consider how harried a GM can get during games. They don't want to spend a lot of time referencing rules or making it all up on the fly. Give them what they need. Imagine, for example, you're writing up a haunted house for a horror game and the PCs are following up on reports of strange lights at night in the attic window. So you provide all the information about the ghost in the attic and so on. But consider



Expect that everything will take twice as long as you planned. Writing, editing, art, layout, printing—twice as long, often because of things that are beyond your control. Revise your plan accordingly, and if you reach the finish line earlier than expected, that's great!

—Sean K. Reynolds

the other angles. The PCs might likely ask the neighbors about the lights. What do they learn? What are the neighbors like?

You don't have to cover every contingency (and in fact you shouldn't try to), but you do want to cover the likely scenarios. And the way to do that is to really think about what questions the people at the table will have and what the answers to the most common ones might be. This takes experience and empathy. Basically, you have to mentally take on the role of the GM and think about what you'd need in that situation.

Fortunately, roleplaying is something we're all good at.

## GETTING PUBLISHED

So, even if you can write the greatest game material ever, that doesn't guarantee anyone's ever going to see it. It's got to be published. Long ago (when I got started, so you know, back when the dice were all made out of mammoth bones) there was only one way to do this, more or less, and that was to submit to an existing publisher. That's still an option, but there are other, newer (and perhaps easier) options.

## THE TRADITIONAL WAY

The traditional way to get published, as I stated, is to submit your material to a publisher. Now, every publisher is different. They're going to have different policies, different formats, and different expectations. Contact a publisher individually and find out all you can about them and what they look for or expect before you send them anything. They might not be looking for unsolicited submissions at all. They might only be looking for designers with some experience. They might be looking only for very specific material. Or they might be open to anything. It really varies, but most are happy to let you know if you contact them.



## GETTING YOUR FOOT IN THE DOOR

In general, regardless of the publisher, consider these issues when you're submitting something for the first time:

- ☞ The publisher doesn't know you, and they probably get a lot of submissions. Why will they publish you and not someone else? Well, if you can make your submission professional, provide examples of your work that show that you understand what you're writing about, and indicate that you're flexible and easy to work with, you're already ahead of the vast majority of submissions.
- ☞ Know the publisher. The publisher very likely has a niche. You should know what that is, and you should tailor your submission to that niche. Some of this is easy. Don't submit your Call of Cthulhu scenario to Kobold Press. Because Kobold doesn't publish Call of Cthulhu. Chaosium does. But it can be a bit more nuanced than that. Don't submit your adventure to a company that mostly publishes rules supplements. Don't submit your massive tome of game material to a publisher that only does short pieces. Don't submit your hyperviolent, sexually explicit new game to a publisher that doesn't appear to have ever published that kind of material before. And so on.
- ☞ Most publishers already have a game (or games), and probably a setting or two that they're trying to support. They probably aren't as interested in your brand new game system or campaign world; they're probably interested in finding someone who will help them support what they've already got. The publisher of a game is almost certainly going to be more interested in the submission of an adventure that uses their game rules than your brand new game which doesn't have anything to do with what they're already publishing.
- ☞ Consider starting small. Trying to start out as a designer who's never published anything by getting someone to publish your brand new game or your home campaign world is like trying to get hired as a CEO of a huge company right out of college. It's

possible, but really, really unlikely. Get your foot in the proverbial door with the submission of something smaller, show them you can be trusted to work as a professional with quality output and an understanding of deadlines, and then do that a few more times. Once you've gotten some real experience under your belt, *then* maybe try to get your game or world published.

- ☞ Find out what the publisher wants to publish, rather than what you want to write. As I wrote earlier, I got my first job by writing what I knew the company was looking for. If they've got a round hole to fill, be a round peg. Make them grateful you showed up.
- ☞ Your submission might only be the means to show them what you can do. You might submit an adventure, but after looking at it, they might tell you that they don't want it. However, they see that you know what you're doing and so they're going to give you an assignment for what they are looking for. For goodness sake don't take this as a rejection. This is a great turn of events.

It's never been easier to turn a game idea into a product, and to bring that product to market. But never lose sight of the fact that once you decide to do that, you're running a business. The creative process is one small part of that business, but for your game to be successful you need to be every bit as proficient at marketing your title and running your business as you are at designing your game.

—Charles M. Ryan

## DOING THE WORK

Once you are working with a publisher, you want to be a pleasure to work with. You want to be professional and pleasant. This is doubly true if you want this first publishing experience to not be your last one.

Do what's asked of you. If you've been given instructions or guidelines, follow them. The publisher probably has a format they like to use when presenting their material. They probably have a style guide that indicates how they like to do what they do. (DM or GM or something else? Roleplaying or role-playing? Capitalized game terms or not? There are a lot of details involved.) They might have very specific instructions on how to deliver material to them, how to handle rewrites, and so on.

When you're really experienced, or if you self-published, you can do things your own way, but if you're new and you're working for someone else, do it their way. If they've taken the time to explain what they want, give it to them.

- ☞ Meet your deadlines. This seems like a no-brainer, but deadlines are king. You can write the world's greatest material, but if it's late, it might be of no use to the publisher. I personally have seen mediocre designers get regular work because they were professional and on time, while far more talented but consistently late designers get shut out.
- ☞ Make sure it's really your work. Don't directly lift ideas from some other source. Your publisher and your audience know all the same movies, books, comics, and games you do, and if it's clear that your sci-fi space station is really Deep Space Nine, or your enigmatic NPC is really Doctor Who, they're going to see that right away. This is lazy at best and plagiarism at worst. This is true of game mechanics too. Now, you might suddenly react to all of this telling me about how copyright law actually works. But I don't care. I'm not trying to just keep you from getting sued. I'm also trying to help you not look like an ass. Create really original material.

- ☞ On the flip side, don't agonize over the fact that your ancient crypt has a wraith in it and some already published adventure with a crypt also has a wraith. You don't have to reinvent the whole genre every time. Learn the difference between going with the tropes, paying homage to your inspirations, and outright theft of ideas. Those are three different things. The first one is always fine, the second one can be, and the third never is.
- ☞ Respect your editor. Your editor might seem like the enemy, but they're your greatest ally. It's literally their job to make you look good. If they make changes, or request that you make changes, go along with what they say (or have a conversation and ask the reason behind their changes, so you can come to an agreement). Good editors know what they're doing, and they will do their best to keep the voice and spirit of your work alive while ensuring it's clear, consistent, and correct. (An editor is also sometimes called a developer, although sometimes those are two different people. And there's probably also a proofer or proofreader, but that might also be the editor. It's complicated, and everyone does it differently.)
- ☞ Once you're done and the project is in the publisher's hands, let them know you've got more ideas too, assuming that you do. Don't be a pest, but once they've published something you designed, they are that much more likely to publish something else from you too. Use that to your best advantage.

## SELF-PUBLISHING

The difference between game publishing now and game publishing 30 years ago is that now you can do it all yourself. Actually, you could then too, but it would have very likely looked amateurish and unprofessional. Now you can make your product look just as slick and beautiful as anything else on the game shelf. That's exciting, but it's also daunting.

Getting in with a publisher might be challenging, but a publisher is going to edit your work, layout your work, get art for your work, print your



work (unless it's PDF only), market your work, and sell your work. If you self-publish, you do all of that yourself. You either need to be multitabled, or you need to find people to help. And if any of them aren't as good at their job as you are at yours, it's going to diminish the finished product.

And perhaps bigger than any of that, a publisher is going to associate your work with their already established games and material. That's important because if you're brand new, how are you going to get gamers to pay attention to you in a crowded marketplace? An existing publisher has a track record for quality (hopefully) and so something published by them will get noticed by their existing customer base, and new customers will know it's okay to give your material a chance.

I'll be honest, there's really no one out there getting rich off of self-publishing RPG products. It's a crowded marketplace, and hard to stand out. That said, self-publishing allows you to do things exactly your way, at your pace. No one can tell you you're doing it wrong. If you succeed or fail, it's all on your merits. It's freeing. And if you really want to, you can start big—a whole new game, a whole new world, whatever you want.

It's probably worth mentioning that if you're self publishing, your project probably *needs* to be a new game or new world. Because with a few exceptions that we'll cover in a moment, if you're self-publishing, you can't use someone else's rule system or world. You can't just create a Seventh Sea adventure and sell it. Seventh Sea is a game created and owned by someone else and unless you're working with them, you don't have the rights to publish work that infringes on their intellectual property.

One of the other advantages of self-publishing is that you can put together a quality piece of work, and even if it doesn't sell a lot of copies, you still have something substantial to show to a publisher. (And on the flip side, if you've been published by an existing company and made a bit of a name for yourself, you're likely to have more success as a self publisher. So it works both ways.)

I'm going to point you in the direction of two great self-publishing opportunities. They're great because they *do* allow you to use existing rulesets and sell your product in a marketplace where potential fans will already be looking for it.

The first is if you're interested in D&D. It's called the Dungeon Master's Guild and it's a place to sell your self-published D&D compatible material. The Dungeon Master's Guild offers a wide variety of helpful tools to aid you in creating your product, and, since it's a popular marketplace, your work has more chance of being noticed. For more information, go to <https://www.dmsguild.com/>

The second is the Cypher System Creator Program. It works very much like the Dungeon Master's Guild, but it's for the Cypher System from, well, my company—Monte Cook Games. For more information, go to <https://www.montecookgames.com/cypher-system-creator/>

There are also other projects like this, as well as open game licenses such as the d20 license. Do your homework, though, because they all work a little differently and if you're using their tools, you have to go by their rules.

## GOOD LUCK!

Game writing is a fantastic creative endeavor. It can be fun and rewarding in many ways. It can also be very challenging. Don't necessarily be discouraged if your first attempts fail. And even if you can't find a publisher or can't make a go of publishing it yourself, you've still got the material to use with your own game group. And playing games, telling stories with your friends, and having fun is the heart of this whole enterprise. Because ultimately, if you are a game designer, what you're doing is trying to help other people have their best game ever.

Find a way to stand out from the crowd in a creative, but positive, way. When I submitted my resume to Monte Cook Games, I produced a multi-page book, printed and hand-bound, as if it were a hardcover RPG supplement.

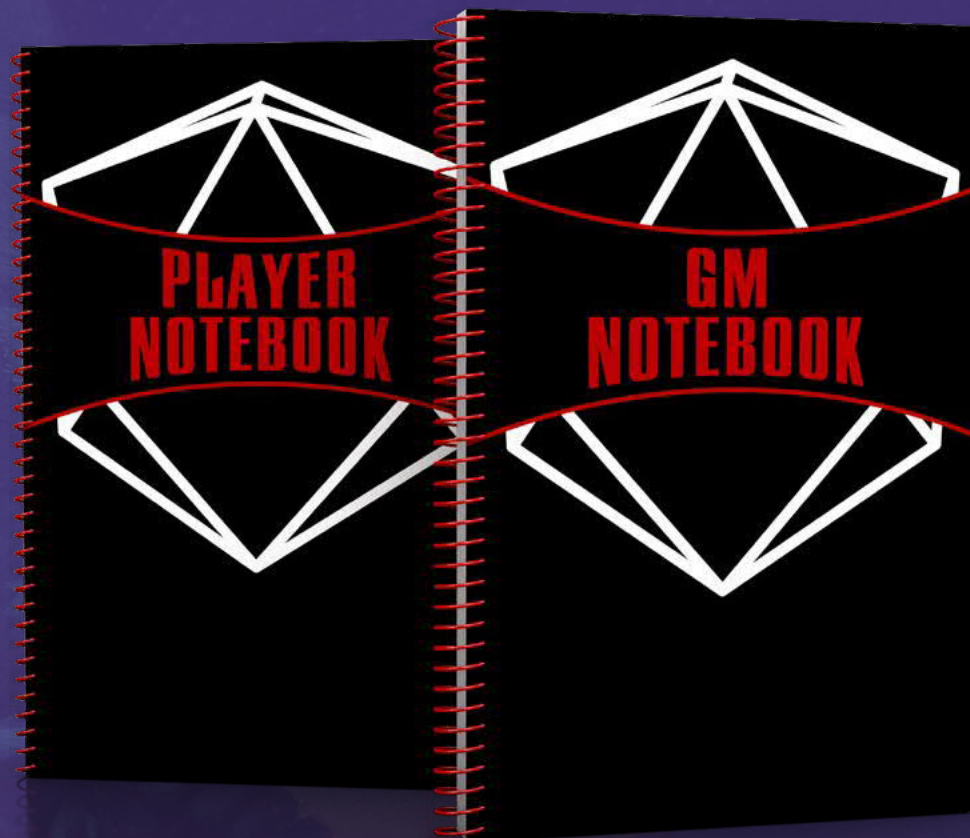
—Bear Weiter

## Want to get even more from your roleplaying games?

The *Player Notebook* gives you room to keep track of your character's background information along with notes about NPCs, important places, and other campaign info. It's 100 pages long and completely system-agnostic, so you can use it for any game—or even multiple characters in multiple campaigns.

The *GM Notebook* provides space to record all the pertinent details about your setting, along with notes on your PCs, NPCs, creatures, adventures, maps, and so on. Both new GMs and old hands will appreciate how the notebook guides you through the worldbuilding and adventure-building process. Like the *Player Notebook*, it gives you 100 pages of space, and is system-agnostic.

Both notebooks are spiral bound, beautiful, and amazingly useful at the game table and between sessions.



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