

# KISMET'S GUIDE TO GAMING

## VERSION 1.0

“And I'll be bound, while you're on your way,  
You'll be telling tales, and making holiday;  
It makes no sense, and really it's no fun  
To ride along the road dumb as a stone.  
And therefore I'll devise a game for you,  
To give you pleasure, as I said I'd do.  
And if with one accord you all consent  
To abide by my decision and judgment,  
And if you'll do exactly as I say,  
Tomorrow, when you're riding on your way,  
Then, by my father's soul – for he is dead –  
If you don't find it fun, why, here's my head!”  
- Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales General Prologue -

## INTRODUCTION

### A Quick & Dirty Guide For Newbies

This guide has been written to provide some very basic information about roleplaying, such as what it is, what it involves, and what a person needs to do to get involved in the hobby. Most official roleplaying books just assume that readers know what roleplaying is and what roleplaying terms mean. To the new gamer, however, listening to experienced roleplayers talk about gaming is like listening to folks speaking a foreign language. What's worse is that roleplaying books often don't have the time or space to explain it all – but I have taken the time, and this guide is the place.

This guide gives you information so basic that you can apply it to just about any type of roleplaying game that's out there. The concepts covered here will help you decipher games that you're trying to learn, so that you can get away from the basics and start to learn the advanced elements. This guide also serves as a kind of introduction to the hobby as a whole for those who are curious and toying with the idea of trying it out.

### What Is A Roleplaying Game?

When we were children, most of us played games that relied on imagination and storytelling. We imagined that our surroundings were different, and often we imagined that we were different people, and we acted out scenes together. Most children's games are sporadic and do not have much in the way of continuity; a child playing a cowboy one day might decide to play an Indian the next day. These kinds of imaginative childhood games also tend to have simple rules: if you don't move before the cowboy shoots you, you are dead.

The games of adults have roots in childhood. Roleplaying games are a lot like our earliest imaginative games - you still get a bunch of friends together and imagine yourselves in different roles. You still create scenes through your choices. The differences lie in the complexity of the matured roleplaying game.

## Rules

The first and most glaring difference is that roleplaying games have rules. There are limits to what you can and cannot do, and there are certain ways to go about things. You can't just crook your finger at a friend and say: "I shot you, you're dead!" Roleplaying games use rules to set up limits and to try to make the game fair for everyone.

When you were a kid, you did not need a manual to learn about the world of cowboys and Indians. You used what you'd seen in movies and heard in stories. For a roleplaying game, you generally need books to learn how the game is played. The most basic rules of a game are usually found in one or two books, sometimes called "core books." These books go over the most basic rules of the system. There are also supplement books that add to the system, showing you new rules or updating old ones. In fact, there are usually so many rules that no one could possibly remember them all – thus, they are printed in books so you can look them up if you have to.

## Dice

Many roleplaying rules have to do with dice rolling. Most games use dice for randomization, chance, and equal opportunity. You may be thinking of a six-sided die (d6) such as those used in Las Vegas dice games. Roleplaying games can use many different types of dice, not just six-sided ones. Dungeons and Dragons, for example, makes common use of d4s (or four-sided dice), d6s, d8s (with eight sides), and d20s (dice with twenty sides). In contrast, Vampire only uses d10s.

When you want to do something major in a roleplaying game (like an attack), you use the rules to determine what is involved in the action and which dice to roll. If you roll a number that is deemed good enough, your character succeeds; if you don't roll well enough, your character fails the action. In this way, you can roll dice to see if your character succeeds instead of trying the action yourself. Roleplaying games are not usually meant to be acted out physically. Instead, they are designed to take place in the mind, with the help of some dice to define the boundaries of what is likely and possible.

## Rules Systems

Different roleplaying games often have different systems of rules. If we are talking about the d20 system, we are talking about a specific system of rules that mostly uses a d20 (or twenty-sided die) for actions. The d20 system is used by Dungeons and Dragons and other games. Wizards of the Coast owns Dungeons and Dragons and the d20 system, however; if other gaming

companies want to use that system for their games, they have to make a deal with Wizards. Likewise, other gaming companies have made up other systems of rules for their games.

## Genres

Roleplaying games can also be divided up according to genre, rather like books or movies. There are different kinds of roleplaying games you can play. There are futuristic roleplaying games that are set in centuries yet to come, when humans have begun to venture into outer space. There are fantasy roleplaying games (like Dungeons and Dragons) that are set in medieval-European style settings and are populated with fantastic creatures. There are even roleplaying games set in a world like modern day Earth, but with fantastic elements woven in (like Vampire: the Masquerade). Sometimes a gaming company will pair one type of game with a particular rules system. Other times, a company will use the same basic rules system for vastly different games.

## Continuity

Roleplaying games are played in sessions. A session can last as long as a group desires, but most people play for several hours before stopping, the way that a game of cowboys and Indians used to last for a little while during an afternoon. You start off a game by creating a character that you will portray (like a character in a book or movie), but that doesn't mean you have to play that character more than once. Most people like to play their characters more than once, however. Some people even play the same characters for years, using them in many different stories. In this way, roleplaying games are more flexible than our old childhood ones, giving us the option to play characters with histories and extended futures.

## Flexibility

Similarly, roleplaying games have more options for players than most childhood imaginative games. They all have some method for combat, so you can fight against enemies with a variety of maneuvers and weapons. Roleplaying games also tend to have methods of dealing with others, so you can lie, persuade, or sneak around without being seen. You can do a lot more than fight the cowboy; using the rules you can trick him, befriend him, use friends against him, or perhaps throw him off a cliff. And you don't have to play a cowboy or an Indian - you can probably choose from different races of people or creatures.

## Interactivity

Roleplaying games are interactive on a level that books and movies are not. You don't just sit back and watch an actor delivering lines in a roleplaying game – you become a bit of an actor and you say what you want your character to say, and you decide what you're going to try to get away with. Sure, there are no painted scenes or special effects, but your imagination can paint a scene for you more vividly than anything on film can. All you have to do is give yourself and your group a chance, and fun hours will pass the way they did during the best summers of childhood.

# What Are Roleplayers/Gamers?

## Directors

Childhood imaginative games did not always have a leader or director – but some games could have used one. How many afternoon games broke up because there was an argument about something that happened? How many games ended because no one knew what to do next?

Roleplaying games cut these problems off at the pass by designating one person as the director of a game. The saying goes that a director “runs” the game, and to some extent this is true. The director gets to make a lot of basic decisions: what type of game is going to be played, how many players there can be, where the action is going to begin, and so on. The director sets the scene for the players and takes on all the extra parts that the story needs. If the players eat at a restaurant, the director plays the waiter. When the players decide what they want to do, the director helps them determine if they’re successful. If the story begins to lag and the players aren’t sure what to do next, the director throws a story at them to get into. The director is also able to make stories of their own to involve the players.

The director, however, also carries a lot of responsibility. The director has to keep the world vital and entertaining for the players, so they don’t get bored. This involves all sorts of creative thinking, planning and shaping. The director is the one who controls enemy characters and uses them in combat against the players – and that is by no means an easy job. While the players only worry about one character apiece, the director has to worry about the rules and actions of all other actors in the scene. These are just the basic duties a director performs each time they run a game.

Perhaps the weightiest duty of the director is to act as a judge of the rules. If there is a dispute about how a rule works or what should happen as the result of a dice roll the director steps in and makes a ruling. The director has to know a good deal about the rules of the gaming system and has to do their best to be fair in their judgments.

## Players

A player is generally responsible for creating and using one character in the story. A player takes on a starring role, while the director takes on the extra parts. Most games are designed for groups of characters to work together. This allows players to interact with one another and to get more done than they would on their own, since different characters tend to have different abilities.

While the director takes care of a lot of bigger plots in the world, the player can make any number of smaller, localized things happen for their character. With every decision a character makes, there are possibilities for the world around them to react and change. The player is expected to use their character’s abilities when faced with situations the director puts in their way, and to some extent the player is expected to generate situations on their own. In this way,

the game always has something going on: if the director isn't creating trouble for the players, then the players are creating trouble for themselves.

## What Is A Character Sheet?

To participate in a roleplaying game as a player, you take on the role of a character. You get to make up your own character, based on the rules and what you are interested in playing. It is up to you to decide where they come from, how they've lived, and what their personality is like. To truly participate in a game with rules, however, you need to know more than your character's life story - you need to have an idea of what they know and what they can do.

A character sheet is a type of form that you fill out, according to various rules, to determine what your character is capable of. There are rules to make sure that everyone starts off on roughly equal footing. The rules attempt to make the process simple to complete and difficult to cheat, so that there aren't major problems later on (say, when one character is overpowered and can bully all the others into doing what he/she wants, which is rarely very fun). A character sheet is the first real step in most games, aside from learning the very basics of what the game is about. A character sheet is also a vital element - if you don't have one, you can't participate.

Most roleplaying games have similar things on their character sheets. The character sheet form provides lines for you to fill in certain information. There is a line to record the name of the character, and another line to record the name of the player. That way, everyone always knows which character belongs to them and can claim the right sheet. There are lines to record what type of character you're playing, which generally has to do with their race, profession, and level of power. Some character sheets have lines to record the age, height, weight, hair color and eye color of your character, as well as a line for gender. These details are not always necessary to game play, but they can help players envision their characters with greater ease.

Characters have natural assets that have to be described in some fashion. For instance: all folks have some sort of physical strength, even if their bodies are very weak. For game play, you have to know how strong your character is to get an idea of what they can do. Roleplaying games always have some sort of Strength trait. In some games, the basic abilities are given numerical values between 0-20. Only a few characters will have ability scores under five, and only a few will have ability scores over 18; most will fall in the middle. A character that has a score of 17 in Strength is a lot stronger than a character with a 10 in Strength. No matter how strong or weak a character is, their Strength score is important to know and there will be a place to record it on any character sheet.

Likewise, all characters have skills. In some games skills are not that important, but in many games they can make a big difference. Character sheets usually have a section to fill in with the skills your character has learned. Skills tend to be point based; the more points your character has in a skill, the better they are at performing it.

Character sheets also have room for recording a character's weapons, armor and valuable equipment. Some games have a lot of equipment for characters to gather; truly, in some games

equipment is very important to a character's survival. In other systems, there just isn't as much equipment and it might not be that important.

Needless to say, there can be a lot of gear to record on a character sheet besides the fancy stuff, like food, travelling supplies, cell phones, and so on. Oftentimes character sheets will have space dedicated to recording the more mundane sorts of gear. This might not seem important at first, but you must keep in mind that a character sheet is a way to record what a character has access to. A player cannot claim that their character has anything that is not listed on their character sheet. Most directors have to approve that a character sheet is fairly made before they will let someone play. A character cannot simply sprout a super-weapon or a bundle of money out of thin air, just because the player wants it so. A character sheet helps to ensure fairness, even to the tiniest details.

A character sheet also allows you to record any special abilities your character has. Just about every system allows characters special abilities to make them each powerful in their own way, and unique. These special abilities vary from system to system. Being able to perform magic is a special ability, for example.

Character sheets also have space set aside for recording experience points. When a character goes through the events of a game, they use their abilities and wits to survive. The character learns more about themselves and about the world. Experience points reflect this learning. When a character has enough points, he or she becomes more powerful. Some games are level-based, and characters get new abilities as they gain levels. They gain levels based on experience points. Other games are point-based, and you can spend a certain number of experience points to raise your character's proficiency with an ability or a skill.

Character sheets record some kind of trait indicating the character's health and their distance from death. Some games have what are called hit points to show how much damage a character can take before dying. As the character goes up in levels, they gain more hit points and thus can take more damage. When your character is wounded, the number of hit points that are lost are recorded on the character sheet. This allows you to keep track of how damaged your character is, so you don't forget how much damage they received during the course of a fight. If they take too much damage, characters die and depending on the system, you may have to create a new character in order to keep playing in that game.

Every system has a different type of character sheet to fill out. Some games have long character sheets, with many aspects to address. Other games have rather short character sheets that don't ask for too much information. It may seem like a tedious way to start out a game, but most character sheets can be filled out without taking too much time. Once you're done, you have a better-defined character to work with and don't have to change much on your sheet (at least for a while). You will find directions on character creation and filling out the character sheet in the appropriate book for the game system you're playing. If the directions do not yield enough information or are obscure, the director of the game should know the game well enough to help field any questions.

### Basic Character Sheet Elements

Character name \_\_\_\_\_  
Player name \_\_\_\_\_  
Character class \_\_\_\_\_ Race \_\_\_\_\_ Type \_\_\_\_\_ Level \_\_\_\_\_  
Age \_\_\_\_\_ Height \_\_\_\_\_ Weight \_\_\_\_\_ Hair color \_\_\_\_\_ Eye color \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_  
Inborn attributes (such as strength, dexterity, physical beauty) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Learned skills (such as those used for lying, climbing, accounting) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Weapons (type of weapon, amount of damage, what dice to roll for it) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Armor (how much it protects you, how much it weighs) \_\_\_\_\_  
Valuable items/mundane equipment \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Special abilities (like magical spells) \_\_\_\_\_  
Experience points \_\_\_\_\_  
Health \_\_\_\_\_

## Who Roleplays?

When Dungeons and Dragons first came out and roleplaying began to develop as a hobby in the late 1970's, early 1980's, the female gender was a thing of storytelling. Very few women were involved in creating the products that were made for roleplaying games, and few women found their way to the gaming table. For a while the hobby was small and didn't get much exposure, period, and when it did take off, men were the ones who took to it. There is a stereotype that only men play roleplaying games, and it comes from this time in gaming history. It is safe to say that for a time, that stereotype was mostly true. There may have been a few females playing and running, but they were things of myth.

As time has worn on, more women have gotten involved in creating games, playing in them, and running them. The roleplaying world has had to adjust to this influx; whereas women are still shown scantily clad in roleplaying artwork sometimes, you can also find lots of artwork with women perfectly clothed and being proactively involved. Many groups have female members, and there are groups out there composed entirely of females.

Despite this, the stereotype of the geeky, socially inept male gamer still predominates. There are those who think that the only people who roleplay are the ones that look and act something like the comic book guy on The Simpsons. People actually stay away from gaming because of this stereotype, if only because they don't want to be associated with people so drastically uncool. I have heard plenty of women say that roleplaying games aren't mature; others have flat-out said that roleplaying games are the purview of male geeks only.

The trouble with this image of the one and only gamer type, of course, is that it isn't true, and a lot of people are missing out on a great hobby by believing in it. There are male geeks

who game, that much must be said. There are also very cool people who game, people who are involved in all sorts of other things (yes, even jocks). There are women, teenagers, and even a few kids being taught how to play by their parents. You can find couples in stores dedicated to roleplaying games, and often both parties are searching for things to use. Who roleplays? Just about anybody.

## What Is A Gaming Group?

A gaming group is a group of people who gather together to play roleplaying games. Most roleplaying games are designed so that one person acts as a director of the game and several people act as participants. Many gaming groups have several players and one director, but not all of them have the same arrangement. Some groups are so large that there are several directors and many players. Other groups are very small, with one director and perhaps two players. When a director and one player game together they're not considered a gaming group per se; most gamers refer to such an arrangement as a "solo" game, because there is only one player.

A gaming group forms a certain consensus. The group has to agree on a place and time to play, so that most people can show up and participate. The group also has to agree on what game system to use, and who is going to be the director. Most of all, a harmonious gaming group has to work together so that the game is fun for everyone who attends.

## The Focus of Various Groups

Birds of a feather sometimes flock together in the gaming world, and groups are often comprised of very like-minded people. A group may be dedicated to one particular game system, or they may like to try a new system every time they play. They may like to play games only by the rules printed in the books, or they may like to make up rules systems of their own. They may like to play games that are very combat-oriented, or they may be more interested in character interaction.

The focus of a group becomes more important when you know what you want out of gaming, because not all groups will allow for what you like best. You might have to ask questions of a new group to see if they like what you do, or if they'll be willing to try something you enjoy. You might also have to find a different group if you don't fit in well, but that's all right – there are more gamers out there than you may realize.

## Joining A Gaming Group

A lot of people form gaming groups out of friends they already have, who may or may not know anything about gaming. A lot of gamers start out by learning the game together with other newbies. You can always broach the subject with your friends and see if they're interested. It might be that they're not interested but they can think of someone else who might be; friends of friends can work, too.



If you have trouble gathering people you know to game, you may have to look for people you don't know. There are several ways to go about this, and all of them should involve some caution. I don't know that the world was ever a safe place but it definitely warrants caution now. It's not that gamers are more dangerous than other groups of people, it's just that if you're going to be looking for strangers to game with, you should keep your mother's warnings about strangers in mind.

If you're calling new people, don't be afraid to ask where they're at, when they game, how many people they game with and how long they've been gaming. Don't feel bad about asking for an address and phone number, and don't hesitate to check out the information you're given to see that it checks out (through a phone book and so forth). It's not a bad idea to meet a new group or a new player at a restaurant or a good place for coffee. If you don't care for the party, it's easier to bow out if you're on neutral ground. Do yourself a favor and tell family and/or close friends where you're going to be when you game with a new group; call in before you go and once you return from the game.

That said, you can meet new gamers through various avenues.

Stores that sell roleplaying games sometimes have bulletin boards for local gamers to find one another. Some places may offer the phone numbers of gamers or their e-mail addresses. If you contact a person for gaming let them know right off why you're calling and where you got their number from, so they know how to approach you. If you feel comfortable giving your number or e-mail address to them, go for it; if not, tell the person that you have the means to contact them in the future.

Stores that support roleplaying games might have days set up for players to come in and play on the premises. You can check your local gaming store to see if they have such an arrangement. Through such an event, you can meet new people on neutral ground but in a very supportive environment. Not all gaming stores have the room or the will to host in-store gaming events, so don't feel bad if your local store doesn't have them. If you find a store that does, however, you might want to check their events out just for the sake of curiosity.

You can also try to find gaming groups through online resources. If you are interested in a particular game, search for web sites about that system. Some web sites have message boards dedicated to gamers looking for other gamers (for an example, see Wizards of the Coast RPG Gamer Classifieds board - <http://boards1.wizards.com/forumdisplay.php?f=51>). Other web sites may offer e-mail groups or Yahoo! groups where you can ask about gamers in your area. This may take some e-mailing and instant messages, but it can work for you.

## A Quick Exercise

All of the information you've just read is probably a little distant for you, if you're new to gaming. There is a way to understand these concepts a bit better, and all it takes is a television. You can probably use just about any movie or television show that is story-based (infomercials, the shopping network, the news and other such programming won't work). You'll probably want to watch something you've watched before, like your favorite movie or t.v. show; you want

to watch something you like but something you don't have to think much about. If you don't know what's going on in the show you'll be spending too much time trying to figure out what's happening. It may be best to find something on videotape or DVD so you can pause it whenever you like.

While the program runs ask yourself the following questions:

- Who are the player characters of the show? These are the major characters around which all of the action of the show revolves. They get most of the screen time, as well. There may be a lot of player characters if the show has a big cast, or there may be only a couple. Look for them. You should be able to find them easily. In a roleplaying game, the players would be acting as the player characters and all of the action would revolve around them.
- Who are the non-player characters of the show? All of the characters that aren't the star characters fall into this category. They may be co-workers, friends, hot-dog vendors or what have you. The director would handle all of these characters.
- What are the player characters trying to do in the show? If they're trying to lie, keep in mind that in a roleplaying game the players might be asked to roll dice to see if they succeed. If there is any violence, keep in mind that players would definitely be asked to roll dice to determine if anyone gets hurt and how much.
- What do the characters gain or lose during the course of the adventure? Did they end up with new stuff? Did they lose their house? What might be written down on a character sheet, and what might be erased?

If you are learning a particular game system, try to identify what rolls would be made using the rules of the system you're learning. It might be fun to do this with friends, or to do this with someone who knows the system already so they can correct you if you're wrong.

## Why Play A Roleplaying Game?

I am not going to try to convince you of why you should take up roleplaying as a hobby, or why you should try it out as a curiosity. Instead, I'm going to give you a list of different reasons I can think of. Pick one, if you can't think of your own.

- It's fun
- It's cheaper in the long run than going to the movies all the time
- It's got more variety than most movies
- It's interactive
- It's a nice break from the stress of the work-a-day world
- It's an excuse to see friends
- It's an excuse to make new friends
- It's a way to express yourself
- It's a way to experience catharsis
- It's a way to while away some hours peaceably
- It's a creative outlet

# Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

Every game system has its own terminology, and many expressions and acronyms commonly used by roleplayers (especially online) are not covered in official printed gaming materials. You may have to ask folks what they're referring to, when it comes to obscure references. There are some expressions that are common to most gamers, and I hope to touch upon most of them here.

It is important to note that gamers often refer to book titles quickly, cutting them down to acronyms. So, for example, the Book of Mighty Bad People might be shorted to the BoMBP. If it seems like someone is referring to a book, try reducing the title to its acronym to see if it makes sense. If you still can't figure it out, ask someone.

It must also be noted that sometimes games have different editions. The first edition of a game is usually its first print, with its first set of rules. The first edition of a game may not have the best artwork, and it may not have rules that work as well as they should. In time, and with some money, the company in question may release a new edition of their game to update it and make it work better. Gamers who talk about such a game may refer to a first edition and a second edition; the editions may have books by the same names, but the content may be very different. Some games have third editions, fourth editions and so on. Pay attention if gamers are discussing books from different editions, because the edition is probably important.

**d<sub>n</sub>**: This designates how many sides a die has. Common gaming dice have four, six, eight, ten, twelve, or twenty sides. Gamers will generally refer to a six-sided die as a d6.

**Canon**: This refers to the details of a game system and the plot lines that are printed in the major, official books. For example, let's say that a game called Heroes of the Day is set on a distant planet, but in a medieval setting. In the history of that world there was a devastating war that happened in the year 736. Books published for Heroes of the Day will also mention the war that happened in 736 and take it into account. As far as the game designers are concerned, the war happened. Roleplayers would say that the war is part of the game's canon. Some roleplayers believe that game directors should not change canon events. Other roleplayers use what they like out of the canon and change the rest for the sake of their own personal games. Gaming companies provide canon through their printed books but cannot force anyone to accept it; in fact, many game designers encourage game directors to change the canon however they like.

**Gamer**: A person who plays roleplaying games is called a gamer, although people who play other kinds of games (like video games) might refer to themselves as the same.

**House Rule**: A house rule is a rule that has been implemented to cover a situation in a different way than what is covered in the printed materials. Some house rules are created because the books do not give enough information on a subject. Other house rules are created because the DM does not like the way that the books handle a given situation. Some house rules cover situations that the books were never meant to cover.

**IC:** This stands for 'In Character.' When someone is roleplaying a character and interacting in the plot, they should be into their character, considering situations from their character's point of view and acting as their character would act.

**Metagaming:** This term refers to using out of character gaming knowledge when you're supposed to be in character, but it can also refer to the way that people in character use gaming terms. For instance, your character is a personality in a medieval fantasy setting, a woodsman for the sake of argument. A woodsman would not automatically know the weaknesses of a monster she's never seen before, but the player might know a lot about a monster because she's read the right book. If the player acts like her woodsman character knows all of the monster's special weaknesses, that player is metagaming. This is not seen as a good or desirable quality in a player.

**Munchkin (a.k.a. Twink):** A munchkin is a person who tries to play a ridiculously overpowered character. A munchkin adds insult to injury by trying to find loopholes in the system to back up their choices, or by trying to cheat outright. Some munchkins do nothing but fight in games and shun all roleplay. Other munchkins want nothing but treasure for their characters.

**NPC:** This acronym stands for 'Non-Player Character.' A non-player character is any character that is not being handled by the players. Everyone else in the world, pretty much. Directors take charge of all NPCs, creating them and playing them to fill in the background of the world. NPC can be allies, villains, background people (cooks, horse groomers, etc.) - anyone in the world that is not run by a player.

**OOC:** This stands for 'Out of Character.' There are times when players are not supposed to be in character. All rules discussions and arguments do not take place in character; they take place out of character, between the players involved.

**PC:** A PC is a 'Player Character,' or in other words a character that a player has created. A PC is the sole province of its creator.

**Rules Lawyer:** A rules lawyer is a person who has memorized the rules and who insists on their own strict interpretation of them, which generally gives the rules lawyer advantages. Some rules lawyers engage in arguments with the DM over rules and hold up the game; that is usually how they earn the name. This is not considered a good thing to call someone.

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