

# Table Topic

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source: reddit.com

# System Showdown

by Seth Tinder

Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs) will often rely on dice systems for actions to be done in-game. What this means is rolling one or multiple dice, and then using the result on the dice to determine the success an action has. Generally, a lower dice roll means less success while a higher dice roll means greater success. Much like real life, an action taken in a TTRPG can have varying levels of success depending on how you roll. TTRPGs typically use the same spread of dice: a 4-sided die, a 6-sided die, an 8-sided die, percentile dice, a 12-sided die, and a 20-sided die. Having a single set of these dice ensures that you can participate in pretty much any TTRPG setting.

However, not everyone wants to play Dungeons and Dragons, or prefers a different system. How do you know which TTRPG system is for you? This article should help. While we will not discuss every system you can come across, this article will discuss the most popular TTRPG systems and give you a general idea of the strengths and weaknesses of each system.

## The D20 System

Arguably the most popular TTRPG system, the D20 system uses the 20-sided die to perform most tasks. Typically this is done by rolling the 20-sided die and adding any appropriate modifiers (per Game Master discretion), then having the final result play out via explanation by the Game Master. The threshold to successfully perform an action is known as “challenge rating,” and is determined by Game Master before anybody rolls any dice; the closer the player’s 20-sided die result is to the Game Master’s challenge rating, the greater the success of the player will be. If a player exceeds the challenge rating with their die roll, their success will be far greater. If a player gets below the challenge rating, their success will be less than stellar.

The D20 system is iconic for a reason. The catharsis of rolling the highest result possible, a natural twenty, on the die is a feeling that often goes beyond words. It can also be equally as incredible when the lowest result possible is rolled, a natural one, as it is likely going to be followed by a hilarious description of the single worst screw-up possible for the given scenario. The D20 system is where I recommend most players start. It’s easy to grasp, easy to execute and does not require much skill or game knowledge since it’s as easy as “high number equals good.”

If this sounds interesting to you, then I recommend Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition as your TTRPG of choice. There have been multiple editions and reworkings to Dungeons and Dragons over the last few decades, but the 5th

Edition is the most streamlined edition, features a good amount of character customization, and has a very low barrier to entry for new players. If you want a little more complexity, Pathfinder 2nd Edition features more customization options, and also requires more thinking since its creatures are less forgiving. If you want the additions Pathfinder offers to the D20 system, but want to do the whole thing in space, then Starfinder is for you; it’s basically Pathfinder but with laser guns and spaceships.

## The D6 System

The D6 system is quite different from the D20 system. Instead of using a bunch of different dice, this system only uses 6-sided dice with little variety. Depending on the game you are playing, you could use one or multiple for your rolls, but the game philosophy is much the same for this system as it is for games that use the D20 system. The Game Master still sets a challenge rating for rolls, you still roll the appropriate dice, and your success is still determined by how high you roll on the dice. What sets the D6 system apart is that it often requires greater strategy and thinking when it comes to what you want to do, and how you go about doing it.

To use the Shadowrun system as an example, how good you are in a certain area will determine how many dice you roll to do stuff in that area. If your character is bad at shooting guns, you will roll fewer dice when shooting guns. With the D20 system, everyone rolls the same dice every time, and while your character may be better at doing certain things it is still easy enough to brute force your way through certain scenarios with a bit of luck. Shadowrun does not give you this same luxury, which is appropriate considering the setting is a dark, dystopian future where you aren’t really meant to succeed.

Besides Shadowrun, another TTRPG that uses the D6 system is the Dragon Age TTRPG, however, it uses the system in a different way. Every player rolls three 6-sided dice, one being a different color from the others. When a player rolls doubles, they get to perform what is known as a “stunt,” or a move that pushes their character beyond their limits for a turn. Dragon Age is less skill intensive than Shadowrun, but still requires a bit more strategy than Dungeons and Dragons, especially when using specific stunts that may turn the tide of a battle completely. The game also features its own setting, which means that using this system ensures towns, non-playing characters, conflicts and enemies are all prepared for you if you would just like to dive into the game.

## The Percentile Dice System

This is arguably the strangest system of the bunch. Percentile dice are a set of two 10-sided dice, with both together being able to roll any number from one to one hundred. There isn't much to say about this system that hasn't already been said about the other two systems. Any game which uses the percentile dice has its own rules for what is considered a success or a failure when using the dice, and these rolls can be manipulated by things like your character or the circumstance in which the dice were rolled in-game. What sets percentile systems apart is the unique things that can be done with the more precise results of the dice.

Runequest is a game that uses percentile dice in combat to determine the accuracy of a hit on an enemy. Hits are always targeted and how well you roll with the

percentile dice will determine your accuracy in hitting the chosen location, and how much damage you do to said location. This is also built into other game systems and can have massive implications on the story being told. If you cut the villain's eye out and the villain retreats, they may come back for revenge by cutting the eyes out of a bunch of people to send a message. While this same thing can happen in Dungeons and Dragons (per Game Master discretion), Runequest's hit location system is fully fleshed out and is a key part of its gameplay, arguably making it more engaging than the combat system in Dungeons and Dragons.

Another game that uses the percentile dice system is Call of Cthulhu. In this game, each of your skills is determined by a double-digit number. The higher the number, the better you are at a certain skill, and rolling a number lower than your skill number

on the percentage dice equates to a success. What sets Call of Cthulhu apart most is its setting and sanity mechanic. Characters are not these larger-than-life adventurers or star-trotting space bandits. Characters in this world are average and very easily killed. One gun wound can take in-game weeks to heal, and that's assuming your character survives the gunshot in the first place. This adds to the already tense and oppressive atmosphere, back-dropped by eldritch gods of inconceivable intent and malice. On top of that, your characters can go insane; with each revelation of eldritch implication, they lose more and more sanity points, gaining effects that impact roleplay and character decision-making. It strips control away from the player but not in a way that is markedly unfair or unfun, instead rather in a way that contributes to the game's established atmosphere.

## Other Notable TTRPGs and Systems

While the D20, D6, and Percentile Die systems are the most popular, there are a few smaller TTRPGs worth mentioning. I first want to mention Mouse Guard. Based on the graphic novels of the same name, Mouse Guard places players in the shoes of mouse rangers, knights, kings, etc. These mice fight to survive in a world inhabited by unruly creatures, political chaos, classist corruption, etc. It's Game of Thrones but with rodents. The game uses one 6-sided

die, with fours, fives, and sixes being considered successes. What makes this game so interesting is the way that it makes character creation matter. Everything from your upbringing, to your current goal, to your instincts, to the names of your parents and elders comes with some sort of mechanical change to gameplay. It can provide you with a higher likelihood of success in a dice roll; characters from your backstory can provide you with supplies and assistance when times are dire; etc. The character creation system in place is arguably more explorative than that of any other TTRPG mentioned in this

article, and I would say it helps immensely if you want to create a character with pre-existing relationships to those in your playgroup.

I also want to call attention to Cyberpunk, which was a TTRPG before it was a video game (Cyberpunk 2077) and anime series on Netflix (Cyberpunk: Edgerunners). This game puts players in the role of the titular “cyberpunks” and has a heavy emphasis on character-building through things like cybernetic implants, hacking, etc.

This cybernetic technology can cause your character to lose humanity and become psychotic, so there is a balancing act to each thing you put on your character. This game is played predominantly with one 10-sided die and has players determining their ability to perform the task before rolling the dice, instead of the other way around like most TTRPGs. What really sets Cyberpunk apart from other games in its genre is its evocative setting and emphasis on style over substance. Like Call of Cthulhu, this world doesn't care about you; the difference between that game and this one is that you can sucker-punch this

game in the face with a giant, battery-powered, metal fist if you want to. You are meant to go wild in this game. As a result, your options for approaching combat, roleplay, character creation, etc. are heavily customizable.

The best advice I can give to anyone looking to get into TTRPGs is to pick the game that seems most intriguing to you from an aesthetic standpoint first and then from a system standpoint second. The reality is that regardless of how easy a system seems to be on paper, there will always be a learning curve and a period of confusion before you can really start

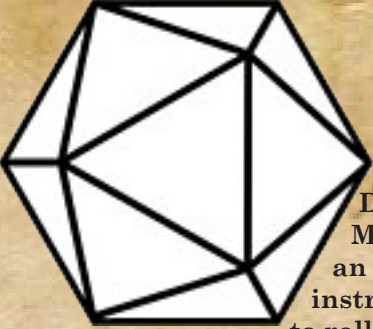
to enjoy the game. So pick the game that most interests you. Do you want to play a game of spaceships and aliens? Check out Starfinder. Want to play with a bunch of strong characters throwing around cars and hacking corporations? Cyberpunk is for you. Want a high-fantasy game of heroism and adventuring? Perhaps try Dungeons and Dragons, and then try Pathfinders afterward. The idea of math and too many dice should not be your reason for turning away the chance to try this wonderful pastime. If a TTRPG looks fascinating to you, then go out and play it!

## Know Your Roll

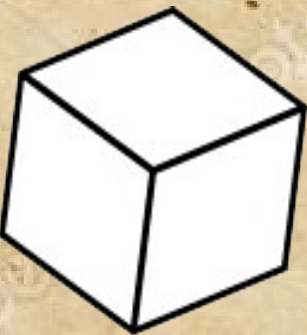
by Ryan Ludu

Dice rolling is an essential part of playing TTRPGs, but to a new player who's only ever played Yahtzee the types and amounts of dice used in these games can get complicated. As many systems use dice in their own unique way, this will cover the basic use and functions of dice under the Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition ruleset.



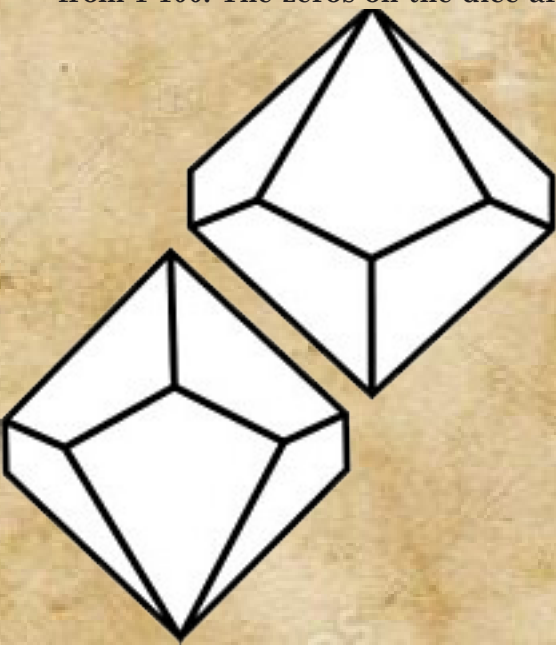


**D20:** The most used die in the system. Most actions taken by players (attacking an enemy, deceiving a guard, playing an instrument, etc.) will result in being asked to roll the twenty sided die (D20) to gauge the result. Each face of the die is shaped like a triangle. The outcome of rolling this die has a wide range of probability with a 5% chance of rolling any number from 1-20, with the general consensus being that the higher you roll the better you do at what you wish to achieve. The highest roll possible, a natural 20, almost always indicates an outstanding success; the lowest possible roll, a natural one, means an extremely unfortunate failure.



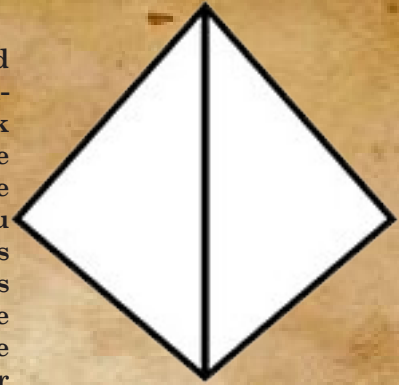
**D6:** The dice type that people are most familiar with. Each face of the die is shaped like a square. The six-sided die (D6) is used to determine the hit points of the wizard and sorcerer classes. It's also used for calculating standard weapon damage (handaxe, javelin, mace, quarterstaff, spear, shortbow, shortsword, scimitar, trident, hand crossbow), calculating spell damage (a successful fireball spell deals 8 D6 points of fire damage), and to determine the ability scores of the player with the most common method being rolling four D6 and dropping the lowest number to figure out stats.

**D10/D100:** The ten-sided die (D10) is used often in the case of full odds probability. There are actually two ten-sided dice in a standard set of seven, together forming a percentile dice (D100). The faces on the dice are numbered from 0 to 9 and 00 to 90 by tens. Rolling both dice at once results in a percentile from 1-100. The zeros on the dice are equal to ten so if you're

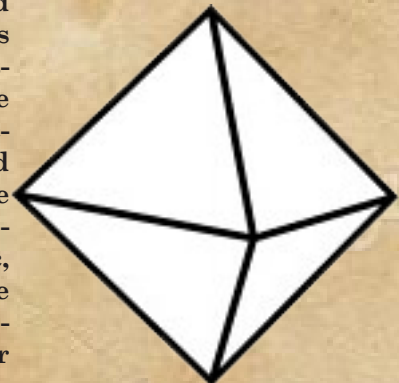


lucky enough to roll a 0 and a 00, the resulting roll is 100! The single D10 has standard uses just like the rest of the dice. It is used to determine the hit points of the fighter, paladin, and ranger classes. It's also used for calculating larger weapon damage (glaive, halberd, pike, heavy crossbow), and calculating spell damage (a successful eldritch blast spell deals one D10 force damage).

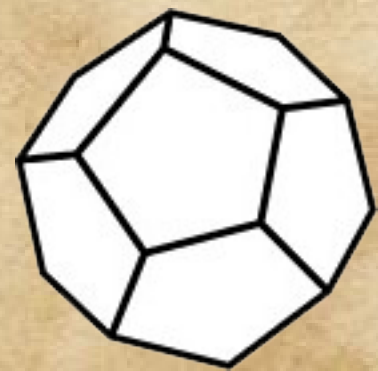
**D4:** The four-sided die (D4), aka the caltrop, is the lego brick of a dice set. If you've ever stepped on one with bare feet you won't forget it. This dice typically has a pyramidal shape with large triangle faces, and is used for low variation rolls having the fewest number of outcomes out of all seven dice. The D4 is used for calculating small-weapon damage (dagger, club, light hammer, sickle, dart, sling, whip), calculating spell damage (a successful vicious mockery spell deals one D4 psychic damage), and calculating health regained by certain healing spells (the healing word spell heals one D4 + spellcasting ability modifier hit points).



**D8:** The eight-sided die (D8) resembles two pyramids attached base to base with triangular faces. The D8 is used to determine the hit points of the artificer, bard, cleric, druid, monk, rogue and warlock classes. It's also used for calculating larger-weapon damage (greatclub, light crossbow, battleaxe, flail, longsword, morningstar, rapier, war pick, warhammer, longbow) and calculating spell damage (a successful shocking grasp spell deals 1 D8 lightning damage).



**D12:** The twelve-sided die (D12) doesn't see much use as it's primarily used by one class. Each face is shaped like a pentagon. The D12 is used to determine the hitpoints of the barbarian class. It is also used for calculating heavy-weapon damage (greataxe, greatsword, lance, maul), and calculating spell damage (a successful witch bolt spell deals 1 D12 lightning damage).



# Build a PC

by Ryan Ludu

No, not a computer. A PC, or player character, is what you are in the great world of TTRPGs. It's what you look like, sound like, what your skills are, your goals, your ideals, etc. Your character is your direct connection to the game that you are playing so it's important to understand how to

play them from a rules and mechanics standpoint, and how to play them from a more loose personal standpoint.

TTRPG systems involves a stat block that your assigned character refers back to. These are called ability scores and they're the number that determines whether your character is going to be better at snooping

or spooking. The six types from D&D include strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom and charisma. To get a basic idea of what these stats can do for you, here are some examples related to tomatoes:

**Strength** is being able to crush a tomato.

**Dexterity** is being able to dodge a tomato.

**Constitution** is being able to eat a bad tomato.

**Intelligence** is knowing a tomato is a fruit.

**Wisdom** is knowing not to put a tomato in a fruit salad.

**Charisma** is being able to sell a tomato-based fruit salad.

In addition to your stats, things like your class and race can have a great impact on what you're able to do. A human wizard can do things that a goblin rogue cannot and vice versa. Some people might wonder if there's a "correct" way to make a character and my answer to that is that there isn't. There's a myriad of combinations that can be made and it can take some time to figure out what you like, but when you figure it out, run with it. It is your character after all.

If you're not one for theatrics, then that's okay. When acting as your character they can

easily be more reminiscent of yourself and your mannerisms than something you're not yet comfortable with. If you want to try expanding your horizons with role play, however, start small and work your way along as you figure out who you are. Do you talk with an accent? How would you react to being served your favorite food? Do you make friends easily or do you prefer

## So You Think You Can GM?

by Seth Tinder

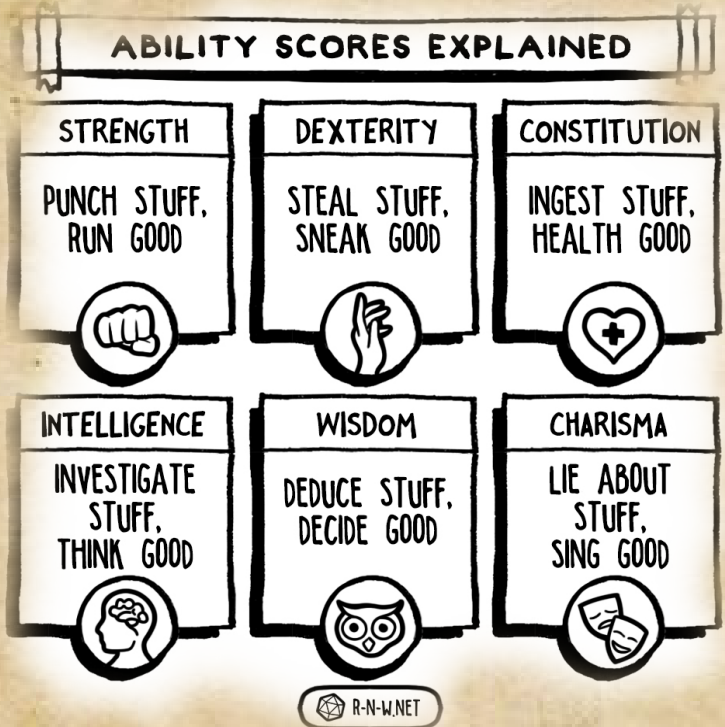
Of the two roles in a Dungeons and Dragons playgroup, the Game Master (or GM), is the most important to ensure the game can happen. The GM creates the world, the encounters, the cities, the story, the non-playing characters,

etc. The GM also has semi-working knowledge of the rules and systems used in whichever TTRPG system is being used to play the game. This means that a GM should know what to do whenever their player says they are using a spell, an item, making a skill check of some kind, and so on. Simply put, without the GM there is no game.

As a result, it is important to have someone in your playgroup willing to GM. In a perfect scenario, everyone in the playgroup takes turns being the GM so everyone can be a player at some point. Regardless of whether your playgroup has one GM or multiple, it is important to understand what it takes to fill the role.

to be reserved? These questions are just scratching the surface of what you can be and how you can further develop yourself while playing your game.

While it may have a low barrier to entry, it can take a lot to be a great GM, and this article will provide just a few tips to up your game as a GM, and perhaps even up your game as a player.



## Game Prep

Both players and GMs ought to get in the habit of preparing for their games. When preparing for a campaign, a GM should prepare what their players will be doing. This could mean anything from planning out a single house to a continent. While this may seem like a lot, if the game you wish to run demands a large world, then the large world is what you must make. If you don't have the time to commit to building a world from scratch, or don't want to commit that time, then you can always pick up a pre-written module. These modules will come with pretty much everything you need to play a great game. However, those pages of content, pre-written or otherwise, need someone to bring them to life. So on top of all the prep of getting your world and campaign ready there is also a good bit of mental prep that you must do as well. Being the GM means getting weird. Silly voices, descriptions of ridiculous occurrences, and accepting that things will go crazy at some point are all things you need to be able to do as a GM. This skill will come with time, but the first step to getting there is the mental hurdle. Once you have your world ready and your voices silly, you must then reach out to your player group to determine a time to meet, a place to meet, who is bringing what, etc. Given that TTRPGs are largely social experiences, it means a lot of planning around people's schedules, and that can get difficult, especially if you want to make playing the game a weekly thing. It's best to take it one week at a time; have a schedule in mind, but be able to adjust and talk to your players to ensure that everyone is on the same page about when the game is happening.

## Player Investment

A good piece of media should keep you invested, and a good campaign is much the same. The difference is that your players have the ability to go wherever they want and do whatever they want. This means that you as the GM must be flexible and quick to create results from your players' experiments. Player agency, or a player's desire to do things, comes from your ability as the GM to present choices and scenarios to your players. The inciting incident for a quest is usually something of great intrigue: a mysterious hooded figure bearing a prophecy; a mystical object of a long-forgotten civilization; a plague of undeath sweeping through kingdom streets; or even just a big fire-breathing lizard attacking a village. If you present your story beats well then your players will be more inclined to stick with what you have written.

Try to breathe as much life into your non-playing characters, settings and big story events as much as possible. It will do wonders in ensuring your players remain invested in your game. I once received a great piece of advice from a veteran GM,

who said to give each of your non-playing characters a want, and then a reason for that want. This is an excellent way to make your world feel more alive. Not just that, but the detail with which you describe things will also give a lot of depth as well. You don't need to describe every piece of furniture or every leaf on every tree, but even just the feeling a place and time has can make your players feel like they are in the world. Let's say they walk into a tavern. What does the interior look like? What are people in the tavern doing? What does the bartender look like? Do the people seem friendly or hostile? Little things like that will go a long way in keeping players interested in your world.

Another thing to keep in mind is to not be afraid if things go off the rails. Oftentimes this can lead to the most fun instances of gameplay in a TTRPG. The players don't know what's going to happen and neither do you. While that can sound daunting, it can be a really fun way to build parts of your world that you haven't had the chance to touch. It can also lead to you saying or doing something really funny or intriguing, which would make your players want to come back for more. Do not try to plan for every possible interaction your players may have with your world as you will get burnt out quickly. Give yourself some grace with how you run your games and understand that you may not be great at improvising at first. Being a good GM is a skill that comes with time in the same way acting, singing or art does. You will not be able to do everything from the get-go, and your first campaigns may be rough, but with time you will learn what works for you and how to keep your players invested. Good GMs can color within the lines; great GMs can fill in the space around the lines.

## Know, Apply, and Break the Rules

As I said before, a good GM has working knowledge of the rules of the game they are playing. This boils down to knowing what dice need to be rolled to do certain things, knowing what items and spells do, and even knowing the internal rules of the world the GM created. While this may sound like a lot, the important thing to remember is that this is a game of application and not memorization. If you don't remember a rule there's nothing saying you can't look it up. What I usually do is keep my books and notebooks next to me while I GM, with sticky notes on the pages I may need to quick reference during a campaign. Just because you are the "Game Master" does not mean you aren't human.

If you don't know something, look it up. If you don't feel like looking it up, then play it how you want. The systems in any TTRPG are more guidelines than sacred text, so if you want something to play out a specific way, then let it! Maximize fun, but also ensure some level of consistency and fairness in what you allow to happen.

### Understand Good Table Etiquette

Being the GM means not only a larger game responsibility but also a larger social responsibility. You are the primary connecting factor between everyone at the table, and as a result, it is largely your job to ensure the game is run peacefully. I would encourage anyone wanting to GM to sit down with your players in what is known as a "Session 0," or a meeting where players can create their characters and get to know each other. Doing this will allow you to establish rules and let players know what is expected of them. Don't rule with an iron fist, but have a few rules in place to ensure that your players are not uncomfortable or have the chance to be difficult outside of the game.

TTRPGs are meant to be safe spaces. Respect everyone's pronouns, choices in and out of the game, triggers, etc. Moreover, if someone is not doing these things, especially after being warned about it, do not be afraid to ask them to leave the table or kick them from the game. If someone is unwilling

to be respectful, then they do not deserve to play. A GM will often have to make these kinds of decisions, and even though it may be hard, you should do what is best for the majority of players at the table.

### Have Fun With It

At their core, TTRPGs are meant to be fun, social experiences. If you spend too much time meticulously planning your campaign and worrying about making it perfect, the moment things go South it will not be fun for you, and by extension, your players will be having less fun too. TTRPGs are not meant to be stressful, so do not make them so. Unless a monster encounter is intense or it is a tense moment of roleplay, you should not feel stressed about what you are doing as a GM. If you created your world, know the rules, and have done everything in your power to ensure that your players will have a fun time, then that is more than enough. Have fun presenting the story you have written, and take your mistakes in stride. Don't be afraid to get into it. Put on a silly voice for one of your non-playing characters; use detail when describing scenes and set pieces; enjoy the story you weave, because it will mean your players will enjoy it too.



## Theater of the Mind

by Ryan Ludu

Speaking from personal experience, I am not made of money. Popular depictions of TTRPGs in media often include sprawling crafted environmental sets with detailed miniature sets inhabiting them filling in the blanks and visualizing the story for its viewers. Meanwhile most all games aren't nearly as polished, which is where the imagination of the players kicks in to pick up the slack. In TTRPGs this is called theater of the mind, and it's used to fill in the blanks that we can't see solely with words and descriptions. The way this is presented varies heavily from GM to GM, but there are some commonalities that can be spotted across many groups if you look for them.

Talking like Shakespeare: When people think of fantasy stories in the medieval ages, how do they sound? The common consensus is that of old English vernacular similar to what is heard in the plays of Shakespeare. Speaking normally is entirely fine in these situations, but the scene imagined is so much different when you hear "the weathered manor dwarfs you, laid atop a dilapidated plinth sunken betwixt the bouldered outcrop and open sky," compared to "you see an old abandoned mansion on top of a cliff."



**Adjectives:** Want to add more detail to an object perhaps? Use descriptive adjectives. Say it's a sword; now expand more on it. It's a long dull sword, covered in rust with chips in the blade, as you lift it the tip crumbles away into dust. The same technique can be applied to scenes which might come in handy if you're playing without any physical materials at all.

**Question Everything:** An extension of describing things, asking questions about what is being presented to you is a great way to immerse yourself in the picture that is being painted for you. There's a huge tree in the center of town. How old is it? Is the bark rough or smooth? What color are the leaves? Oh, they're orange, it must be autumn. Inferences can be made based on what information is relayed so don't feel like every tree needs to be described leaf by leaf. If you hit on key checkpoints the rest can fill itself naturally.

## Warriors for Hire

by Ryan Ludu

So you wanna play your very own TTRPG game but you have no one to play with? Not to fret as there are plenty of ways to get yourself playing as soon as possible. The easiest and most obvious way to start a game is to just ask people around you. Be it friends, family or whoever, it's great to seek out a group of people that you already know so that way you're all comfortable with each other going in. If you're looking to put yourself out there with an entirely new batch of people there are ways for that too. Look for clubs around your local area.

A lot of times schools, libraries, and game stores will host nights where people can come in and play TTRPGs in an organized setting, which can be really great if you're someone who likes consistency. There's also the option of looking on the internet for people to play with. There are dedicated online communities like Facebook and Reddit that are always advertising games that occur over voice chats and video calls. Roll20.net is a popular service that has all the tools to run a game online with your group, and there are even chat forums that are constantly advertising new games that can be curated to your system of choice and time

of day you want to play and other extensive filters. What's most important is that you communicate with your newfound party. If someone does something that makes you feel dissatisfied or uncomfortable in your group, then don't be afraid to say something about it. The game is meant to be fun for everyone and that works best when everyone is on the same wavelength with each other.

