

Alert Collector

Matthew Galloway, Col. Ed.

Games in the Stacks

Sourcing Board Games and Tabletop Role-Playing Games for Your Library

Rachel Knight

One of the many words I use to describe myself is *gamer*. I've been watching my parents play board games and tabletop role-playing games for my entire life, and I've been playing them myself for nearly that long. I volunteer at conventions each summer to help others experience the joy these games can bring, and I'm a proud member of ALA's Games and Gaming Round Table (GameRT).¹ There's something for everyone, from well-known classics like Monopoly and Dungeons and Dragons to modern standouts like Exploding Kittens and Heart: The City Beneath. Just like how there are patrons coming into the library who want to read James Patterson's newest book or watch Tom Cruise do his own stunts, there are patrons who love to sit down at a table and play.

Why Games?

GameRT has a wonderful article on why games and gaming belong in the library, which contains links to a variety of resources.² To summarize, all sorts of libraries can use games to support library missions, from entertaining a variety of age groups and demographics to promoting critical thinking and encouraging language skills.³

Board games and card games are the most common types of games in many library collections—because both are frequently lumped together as “board games” by publishers and retailers, this article will do the same. These are the games many grew up with for family game nights or fun times with friends and family, everything from euchre to Rummikub to Catan falls under this category. Classics like Phase 10 remain popular, and there's also a steady stream of new titles coming out from a variety of publishers. There are board games for families, board games for children, and board games for adults. There's also a variety of lengths of board games, ranging from under an hour to an entire day or more of playtime. You can't go wrong with a few traditional decks of cards added to a library's game collection, but there's so much more out there as well.

Tabletop role-playing games, or TTRPGs, tend to resemble books more than the UNO and backgammon games of our childhoods. These games involve players acting or “role-playing” as imaginary characters and going on adventures together,⁴ and they are growing in popularity thanks to the success of shows like *Stranger Things* and *The Legend of Vox Machina*. Most TTRPGs require someone to volunteer as the Game Master, or GM (sometimes known as the *Dungeon Master* [DM]), to run the game. The GM creates a world for the players to explore, with rules and mechanics

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varying from one TTRPG to another, and the GMs often read more TTRPG books than their players so that they can understand the specific TTRPG they're running. There are some TTRPGs that do not require a GM and instead have the players create a world together, but these are less common. While Dungeons and Dragons is one of the most well-known TTRPGs, especially the 2014 Fifth Edition and its 5.5 update from 2024,⁵ it's not the only TTRPG that can be a good fit for library shelves.

Video games can be another wonderful addition to a library's collection. However, due to the unique complexities and hurdles associated with digital media and electronic devices, they are outside this article's scope.

Locating Game Reviews

Unlike traditional books, board games and TTRPGs aren't likely to appear in *Kirkus Reviews*, *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, or similar publications. So where does one go to locate game reviews and recommendations when selecting games for a library setting?

A useful source for locating games recommended for libraries is the Platinum Play Hall of Fame, also known as the Platys, curated by ALA's GameRT.⁶ This list is intended for libraries, highlighting games that are good fits for library collections and/or programming, with preference given to games that can be played in less than an hour, have some level of uniqueness, and cater to a range of ages.⁷ The Platys includes a list of Platinum Plays selected from games published two to ten years prior, with new titles added annually beginning in 2024.⁸ The Platys also includes Platinum Play—Classics, defined as "evergreen titles well-suited to Library programs and collections."⁹ Categories for the Platys are Board and Card Games, Tabletop Role-Playing Games, and Video Games.

Along with the library-focused Platys, there are many other awards for outstanding board games and TTRPGs. Some, such as the Origins Awards,¹⁰ include categories for both board games and TTRPGs. Many are issued only to board games, including the Spiel des Jahres and Mensa Select®.¹¹ A few are issued only to TTRPGs, with one of the most well known being the ENNIE Awards.¹² All of these awards, and many others, highlight outstanding games that could be popular with patrons.

However, not every wonderful game wins an award, and not every award includes information about what makes a game great. One of the better sources out there for information about nearly every board game is BoardGameGeek. BoardGameGeek is a board game database that includes over 120,000 games.¹³ For TTRPGs, there's RPGGeek, another database from BoardGameGeek, LLC.¹⁴ Both databases are completely free to use, and they include all sorts of helpful information about a variety of games, from genre classifications and player counts to community ratings and forum discussions.

Where to Purchase Games

Unfortunately, board games and TTRPGs rarely appear in the catalogs of traditional library vendors like Brodart and Ingram. Many titles will be available on Amazon, but not all, and it can be difficult to locate genuine listings amid a sea of fake ones. Additionally, many publishers prefer that their games be ordered elsewhere instead of via Amazon because of the company's history of shady business practices.¹⁵ However, for libraries that are limited in where they can order materials, Amazon can be one of the better options for building a game collection without having to create accounts with multiple new vendors.

For many games, the best way to order is directly from the publisher, and there are a not-insignificant number of publishers that will happily donate games to a library's collection if said library reaches out. GameRT maintains a list of game publishers and organizations that provide discounts and/or free games to libraries.¹⁶ A nonprofit organization on GameRT's list, the Spiel Foundation, donates bundles of board games to organizations such as libraries. A TTRPG distributor on the list, Indie Press Revolution (IPR),¹⁷ will be attending 2026's ALA Annual.¹⁸ Another major TTRPG publisher and distributor is Studio 2 Publishing,¹⁹ although as of the time of this article's publication, Studio 2 doesn't offer any sort of discount program for library orders. There isn't a Studio 2 or IPR for board games, so many of them have to be ordered directly from the publisher or from a larger online storefront like Amazon. Some publishers and distributors would love to see their games on library shelves but don't know where to start, especially because a large majority of board games and TTRPGs are produced by small publishers—if you find a game that would be a good fit for your library, try reaching out to the publisher!

Want to Learn More?

The lovely folks of GameRT are always happy to talk about the intersection of games and libraries. Check out the GameRT blog and resources at <https://games.ala.org/> for a variety of articles on board games, TTRPGs, and more!

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