Club Ed Conversations

Editing Role-Playing Games

Katherine Kirk answered questions about editing role-playing games. The transcript has been edited for typos and clarity and to remove some of the “Hi, how are you?” conversation that happens in a live chat.

Katherine Kirk is a CIEP and PTC-trained editor who lives halfway up a volcano in Ecuador, herding commas and catching stray apostrophes. She is a ginormous geek who loves playing games, and edits rulebooks, game materials, modules and magazines for tabletop role-playing games. As a lawful good editor, Katherine also makes an effort to encourage inclusivity and conscious language across all the genres she edits. Get in touch with her on Twitter at @GeckoEdit or through her website, [www.geckoedit.com](http://www.geckoedit.com). Her favorite game at the moment is First Contact by Cosmodrome Games.

**Katherine**: Hello! I am so excited about this, and looking forward to the questions you might have for me! I’ve even made a handout (can you tell I used to be a teacher?) that covers some of the basics, and which has a link to a sample style guide I made with one of my tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) clients.

[You can grab it right here!](https://tinyurl.com/TTRPGediting)

It is a great niche, and the industry is booming thanks to Kickstarter and content creators like Critical Role bringing it out of nerdy basements and into the spotlight. There’s also a lot of push lately to make them more inclusive and update the language a bit to fit modern sensibilities, which opens up doors for people who want to work as Sensitivity Readers on games, too.

Also, here are some of the acronyms and jargon that might pop up. We gamers do love our acronyms…

* TTRPG: Tabletop role-playing games
* D&D: Dungeons and Dragons, published by Wizards of the Coas
* WoTC: Wizards of the Coast
* DCC RPG: Dungeon Crawl Classics Role-playing Game, a TTRPG based on old-school D&D, published by Goodman Games
* Stat blocks: The description of characters’ abilities, such as strength (STR), attack (ATK), etc. This is usually pretty acronym and number dense, and probably the trickiest thing to check in a TTRPG module.
* TTRPG module: A story or adventure based within an existing game system, usually published as a stand-alone book.

Here’s an example stat block from one of my clients (*Tales from the Smoking Wyrm*), shared with permission:

**Stonetooth:** Init -1; Atk claw +2 melee (1d4+2) or curse (DC 16 Will save) or spell; AC 9; HD 3d12; 27 hp; MV 20′; Act 1d20; SP curse, wildshape, control þurs; spells (+6 spell check): *color spray, levitate, phantasm, ray of enfeeblement*; SV Fort +4, Ref +1, Will +5; AL C.

This is probably the hardest thing to edit. I usually put one that is correct in the style sheet and then use it as a model, as if I was checking references.

**Question** (Jennifer Lawler): *Given that I know very little about role-playing games except that I used to play Dungeons & Dragons in college, would you mind talking a little about what an RPG is and how it differs from just a general board game?*

**Answer**: Usually, board games are focused on the pieces and cards that are moved around on the table. They often can be played in a single sitting. Tabletop roleplaying games also use dice, figurines and maps on the table, but the majority of the game is happening in the players’ imaginations. It’s better described as an adjudicated collaborative storytelling experience. One person, the dungeon master (DM) or game master (GM) (or referee, or something like that) controls the world and the monsters or NPCs (non-player characters) in it, and the rest of the players pretend to be people (or animals, or robots, or…) who react to situations and interact within that world.

TTRPGs can be played in a single sitting, or they can take years. My home Dungeons and Dragons game is going on three years now. Alternative games like Ten Candles are played for as long as it takes the candles to burn down.

**Question** (JL): *How, in general, are these games edited? For example, what are the actual deliverables? What kind of copy are you editing?*

**Answer**: It depends on the job. I’ve edited games where I was proofreading the text for the cards, rulebooks and story books, and those were all in tables in Word. I’ve also edited magazines and game modules where I was proofreading the laid-out PDFs in Adobe, or articles for TTRPG magazines where I was copy-editing the text in Word before layout. They usually have a lot of tables, statistics and rules all mixed in with very rich story content.

**Question** (JL): *Oh, it just popped into my head that I used to play Magic: The Gathering. That’s not quite an RPG, is it? I see the cards in the same places I see D&D books, so I suppose there is audience crossover.*

**Answer**: I’m not super familiar with Magic: The Gathering, but it certainly exists within the same realm. In fact, I think it’s also published by WoTC, and there’s some crossover between the cards and Dungeons and Dragons adventures for sure.

**Question** (JL): *How familiar do you have to be with the story world to edit RPGs? What world knowledge do you need to have to edit effectively?*

**Answer**: None whatsoever, to be honest. If you’re familiar with the world, it does help, but I like to approach the game from the viewpoint of a first-time player. If something isn’t comprehensible to them, they’re not going to be able to play it. A lot of indie game developers have created their own worlds for the games, so that information is built throughout the text, just like if you were editing a scifi or fantasy novel in a new series.

When it comes to catching things that don’t make sense within the world of the game, I think that’s what playtesting is for. Before the text comes to me, the designers make a prototype, grab a bunch of knowledgeable friends, and play through the whole game. Often playtesters will deliberately try to break the game, pushing any weak spots. So by the time it comes to me, those “rules lawyers” have already caught most of that stuff. That said, if you are familiar with the world of the game, it can’t hurt. But it’s definitely not a necessity. If something feels confusing, I’ll drop a query and often the designer will explain it to me; it might be some text on part of the game that I never saw, or it might reveal that they need to explain something a bit more obviously in the game text.

It might be a little more important to understand terminology and mechanics that are common across game systems, such as “stat blocks” and what 3d6+7 means, etc. So, if you’re curious about editing for a certain game publisher or game system, it is worth getting your hands on some texts they’ve already printed to see how those terms are used within context.

**Question** (JL): *This brings up another question – is the game designer the writer? Or is this just the lead person on a team of people who put the game together?*

**Answer**: The game designer can be the writer quite often, especially for mini modules or expansions that indie creators publish as part of the Wizards of the Coast games. WoTC have made it possible for anyone to submit content to grow their world or system, so long as it doesn’t break their rules and carries their copyright information. I’ve worked on magazines with teams of writers, or individual writers for adventures published within the magazine, and also with game developers who hire a team of writers to bring their story to life. In this sense, I think it’s a bit like working in nonfiction with multi-author texts, theses or manuals.

**Question** (Jake Nicholls): *I’m curious how long TTRPGs tend to be, in terms of word count? And is there any sort of industry standard/expectation? I can imagine some of them can get pretty massive!*

**Answer**: Oh, they vary wildly. My biggest job was a 500k word game with dozens of cards, three choose-your-own-adventure-style story books (and two more to come) and rulebooks for the original version and expansion packs.

I also have a module on my shelf that’s only about 50 pages long.

**Question** (JL): *500K!!!! Are there fairly standard fees for this type of editorial work, or is it all over the map?*

**Answer**: I think TTRPG editing is kinda like the Wild West of publishing. Many game designers don’t even know that they can get their work edited, so we’re still figuring out. I don’t think there are standard fees beyond standard fees for general editorial work. It depends on how much you think your time is worth, and what you need to live on. If a potential client can’t afford you, they’ll hire someone cheaper, and the clients who can afford you will hire you if your work is of a high standard.

**Question** (JL): *Would you say a playtester is something comparable to a beta reader? I’m assuming this isn’t a paid position a freelancer could angle for.*

**Answer**: Yes, playtesters are a lot like beta readers, and like beta readers, they can be paid or unpaid. Game designers often playtest for each other. I was actually invited to join a game one of my clients was running, where he was testing the monsters and puzzles! I played the role of clueless newbie to the system, ha! Best job ever.

**Question** (JL): *You mentioned Kickstarter – is this something that’s used for the equivalent of indie publishing? I’m guessing writers/designers might take their game idea(s) to traditional RPG publishers the way authors do with their mss but then might also choose to develop/publish the game themselves?*

**Answer**: For Kickstarter, yeah, I think that’s a great comparison. Indie publishers usually use Kickstarters to raise funds for the editing, artwork and printing of their games, and they can self-publish through websites like DriveThruRPG and DNDBeyond. Some of my clients have ganged together and formed an indie publishers union, and they promote and sell their publications together at conventions.

**Question** (JL): *Are there fanfic versions, too? I’m curious how that’s handled in RPG, because there is such a split in book publishing–traditional publishers will sue you for infringing copyright but indie authors often welcome other stories built in their worlds.*

*Oh, I think you answered this question above! I love that WoTC allows people to add to the system—I mean, what better way to promote engagement?*

**Answer**: That’s tricky. WoTC have worked around it by allowing these “fanfic” versions with certain conditions (like including their copyright info), and they will come down hard on people who break the rules. Indie game designers are usually quite protective over their content, in my experience, such as requiring me to sign an NDA before I ever see any of the content. Spoilers and leaks can lead to piracy of the game or ruining it for their players, so that has to be carefully controlled.

But some creators, like Jim Wampler, who created Mutant Crawl Classics for Goodman Games, get such a kick out of people enjoying their material that they support and encourage people who create things for their system. It depends on the person, I think. But it’s usually quite easy to find that info, because it matters so much to people who have poured their heart and soul into creating these products, on both sides of the fence.

**Question** (JL): *Oh, that’s interesting about the NDAs – and a bit different from working with indie book authors. I mean, I wouldn’t work with an indie author who expected me to sign an NDA because that’s so not the norm. Good to know about those differences!*

*Are there others you can think of regarding difference in editing book mss (whether fiction or non) and RPGs? I’m guessing what goes on an RPG style guide is likely a little different from what goes on a ms style guide?*

**Answer**: I think editing games is much closer to editing nonfiction than fiction, even though the content is about imaginary worlds. It comes down to a lot of tables, instructions, charts or maps, and so on. But the text tends to be quite whimsical.

Other differences from fiction, I think, would be how the information is delivered. The game book is basically a reference guide for the GM to tell the story, so information is usually delivered as efficiently as possible. That means much more telling than showing; the GM is encouraged to turn the telling into showing in how they present that information to the players. I also try to make the key information as easy to look up as possible; there’s nothing worse in a game than having to stop the flow of the story to check a stat, and then taking twenty minutes to find it because it’s not clearly set in a logical place.

There are also some language differences that have evolved as “game-speak” but would read as terrible in fiction, such as “Players must succeed a DC15 Perception check to notice the tripwire.” You also have to be clear at all times whether you’re talking about the player who is rolling the dice, or the player character who is interacting in the world. So it’s another level of POV to think about.

Also, if it’s a TTRPG board game with elements like cards or game pieces, your ability to visualise the processes of the game becomes important. For example, in one game they were very particular about cards being revealed in a certain order. I raised a query along the lines of (but more professionally phrased) “I am a clumsy player myself and I would totally drop these cards and mix them up. How will players be able to put them back in the right order without spoiling the game for themselves? I suggest a small number in the corner on the back of the card.”

**Question** (JN): *This is all so interesting! I get the impression that the RPG industry is very much community-driven? I guess that comes naturally out of the cooperative/social nature of the games…*

**Answer**: Yes! I love the community support. There’s a great community of game creators on Twitter, and they frequently promote each other’s work. You get a great sense of collectively growing the industry and hobby, rather than competition against each other.

**Question** (JN): *Can I ask how you got into editing TTRPGs? Was it something you knew from the start you wanted to specialise in, or did you end up there some other way?*

**Answer**: I fell into it by accident. A friend of my husband was doing some artwork for a magazine and she knew I edited, and she recommended me to the publisher. He turned out to be a bit of a legend in the gaming community and he sang my praises to other creators. I found that I really enjoyed editing the content. A catalogue of post-apocalyptic household appliances? An encyclopedia of magical plants? Time-travelling dinosaurs? It’s so much fun. Once I realised how much I liked it, I added some text about it to my website, got the SEO wheels churning, and inquiries started to come in. But my work is mostly word-of-mouth.

Some publishers advertise for editors, so it’s worth getting familiar with them and keeping an eye on their social media, as well as adding them to your usual cold-emailing list. (Insert plug for Jennifer’s Getting Work from Publishers and Packagers course here!)

Another strategy I’ve had burning in my back pocket, for when the pandemic is over and I can do so safely, as my asthma puts me at risk, is to get a bunch of business cards or flyers made and do the rounds of the game publisher tables at conventions. Even better, if you can get a seat at a table where one of the game designers is playing, you can be even more visible and connect with them on a personal level, making them more willing to buy what you’re selling.

**Question** (JL): *What is the production process like? For trad book publishing, it’s basically (with variations here and there):*

* *nonfiction book is proposed (based on a written proposal)*
* *concept is tweaked as decided by AE, edit committee, and AU*
* *book is written to a deadline*
* *book is developed by DE*
* *book is revised by AU (may take two rounds since nonfiction authors aren’t always good writers)*
* *book is copyedited by CE*
* *copyedits reviewed/accepted by AU*
* *book is put into production*
* *cover is designed and approved*
* *layout is designed and approved*
* *galleys are reviewed by AE or DE and AU*
* *galleys are proofed*
* *final changes made*
* *printer does their work*
* *ebook stylist does their work*
* *other magic with keywords and ISBN assignments*
* *book appears on bookshelves/ebook sites*

**Answer**: Good question, and I think it varies by publisher depending on how professional they are. I usually only see it in the final production stages, where it’s more similar to how a magazine is published, but they do generally follow the same concept to product steps.

If there’s a Kickstarter, they could launch it at any point during the process. Being aware of a Kickstarter deadline can be important for figuring out your own timeline and how much of a rush fee to charge. Like most publishers, they tend to leave editing for the last minute.

* Design/concept of game system and rules
* Rough draft of text, with the focus on the mechanics like tables and stats
* Playtesting and prototyping, commissioning artwork
* Revising text and finalising the narrative bits
* Beta reading, sensitivity reading, internal editing
* Copyediting
* Layout and artistic design of materials
* Proofreading
* Publishing

**Question** (JL): *Where could we learn more about editing TTRPGs?*

**Answer**: If you want to practice editing TTRPGs, I recommend grabbing a free module from somewhere like DMsguild.com and proofreading the text. I do not recommend then telling the game designer you fixed their already published document, of course, but it can help you to get the hang of how the pieces fit together for personal use.

**Question**: *How big is the audience for RPG? You may not know this but I’d be curious about how big a print run a typical RPG produces.*

**Answer**: Gosh, I have no idea. Wizards of the Coast published figures that said over 50 million people had played D&D by 2020. And that’s just one game system. Plus, people being stuck at home in lockdown created a big boom as they sought escape into fantasy worlds.

**Question**: *You mentioned sensitivity and inclusivity in your bio – what does that look like in a RPG? What are some common issues you see?*

**Answer**: In an RPG, sensitivity can look like using singular they to refer to players and characters, being nonspecific about gender, avoiding gendered stereotypes (e.g. that all RPG players are men who live in their mothers’ basements, which is patently false), avoiding having species be described as inherently good or evil, avoiding species inspired by harmful cultural or ethnic stereotypes, promoting the use of safety tools at game tables such as cards that let players “fade to black” or “skip to the next scene” when something might be harmful to them, and probably more that I can’t think of right now.

One example is the depiction of goblins, who are based on antisemitic stereotypes and have traditionally been described as ‘evil’ as a racial characteristic. It’s obvious how that can be harmful, so people are making conscious efforts to counter that and undo it. Publishers like Wizards of the Coast have started including instructions to counter insensitive language in their style guide (as of 2019) and creators are working together to come up with new ways to tell stories that don’t harm their players.

Frequent problems that come up at tables are things like oversexualisation of certain characters or situations (because consent is important even when the consenting party is imaginary), microaggressions, dealing with abusive players, and so on. Every now and then, as we see in regular publishing too, someone throws a fit about being “censored” because they have been asked to be more inclusive or less harmful to their readers or players, and the social media volcano explodes, and everyone gets upset. And then hopefully things get a little better, and people learn from it. This kind of change takes time. I recommend Crystal Shelley’s Conscious Language Toolkit for Writers and Editors to help navigate this.

**Response** (JL): Katherine, this is so helpful! Love the idea of safety tools. Sort of like fast-forwarding over the parts I don’t want to see/deal with. And Crystal Shelley is brilliant about these issues. I highly recommend her work, too.

**Response** (JN): It’s really interesting (and encouraging) how sensitivity and inclusivity are being considered at all levels: from the worldbuilding, to the text, and within the actual playing space/session!

**Answer**: Yes. There will always be pushback against change, but I like the overall trend towards being considerate of other people.

**Question** (JN): *Would it be fair to say that the TTRPG industry is dominated by D&D-style fantasy? Are there many games in other (sub)genres (and/or other fantasy traditions), or are they regarded as quite niche within the industry?*

**Answer**: D&D-style fantasy was the foundation, and a lot of systems built on it. But since then, they’ve diversified hugely. [I once ran a game where the players were five raccoons trying to drive a single race car.](https://gshowitt.itch.io/crash-pandas#:~:text=A%20downloadable%20game,the%20car%20into%20a%20wall.) Ten Candles is a horror game where no one survives, and when I played, we set it on a modern cruise ship.

Starfinder and The Expanse do space really well, and there are hundreds of thousands of subgenres and other fantasy or scifi settings. To be honest, I think Pathfinder and D&D have the typical medieval orcs ‘n elves fantasy setting pretty well covered, so that leaves room for other publishers to come up with innovative settings.

I’ve played vampire games, superhero games, cold war spy games; I think it’s pretty limitless, and I don’t know if they’re necessarily niches. I think WoTC and Paizo are comparable to the Big Five in publishing, and they have the biggest marketing departments. But indie game publishing is definitely growing.

**Question** (JL): *My first thought on reading this was, “But if everyone dies, who wins the game? Then I realized maybe I was missing the point. What are some of the things that constitute a good game-playing experience for players?*

**Answer**: Well, in that game, it’s not about winning. It’s about the shared experience of creating the story together. When we played, it ended up being extremely intense, even though the players had made goofy characters.

One of the great things about TTRPGs is that even if you lose, you still have fun doing it. My character in my client’s game, when I was playtesting, made some bad choices and was trampled to death by baby elephants, and it was one of the most fun moments of the game for me!

A good experience is based on that sense of fun, of autonomy within the boundaries of a rules-based and fair system, and the possibility to explore things they can’t necessarily do in their real life. I particularly enjoy the challenge of taking on a persona very different from myself, and having to empathise with them and really inhabit their psychology. My husband likes making every character he plays a variation of a Nicolas Cage character and blowing stuff up.

From an editing perspective, being able to access the information you need so you can quickly decide things like how heavy the baby elephants are, how fast they move, and whether recovering my poor character’s body will enable the others in my team to save her (it didn’t), makes a huge difference. So clarity, conciseness while maintaining the whimsy and flavour of the game is key.

**Question** (JL): *Do you have suggestions for Twitter hash tags to look out for (maybe #TTRPG?) or other spaces where designers hang out and where eds could connect with them?*

**Answer**: I think BoardGameGeek has some active forums, though I haven’t explored them. On Twitter, I use #TTRPGCommunity and #TTRPGfamily, and people usually have a few other hashtags on their tweets that you can follow down the rabbit hole. Some publishers have pretty active facebook groups where the creators interact with players and fans. I mostly get my work by word-of-mouth or through SEO on my website, so I haven’t spent much time out hunting. Oh, and the community is very active on Reddit too.

Thanks, Katherine, for joining us. I learned so much! I appreciate your time.