

Unique Features of TTRPG Rulebooks and Sourcebooks

Tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) books – including core rulebooks, campaign/adventure modules, and supplemental sourcebooks – have a distinct “design language” that sets them apart from other types of books. They serve a hybrid purpose: part technical manual, part creative world-building tome. This dual nature leads to unique structural and visual features not commonly found in other rule or reference texts (certainly not in legal codes or standard textbooks). Below we explore the key distinguishing characteristics of TTRPG publications, from layout conventions to content and usability considerations, and how they contrast with other genres.

Structured as Reference Manuals (Textbook-Like Organization)

At their core, TTRPG rulebooks are organized much like technical manuals or textbooks. They are meant to teach readers how to play the game and also to be referenced repeatedly during play. Accordingly, they are highly structured with clear **sections and headings** (for rules chapters, character creation, combat, magic, etc.), **tables of contents**, and often comprehensive **indexes** for quick lookup. The layout typically uses a **two-column format with hierarchical headings, bulleted or numbered lists**, and other elements that make information accessible at a glance ¹. In fact, one analysis notes that a core RPG rulebook often functions “as an encyclopedia or physics textbook,” compiling all the game’s essential information in a systematic way ². This resemblance to textbooks and technical guides means that, in theory, one *could* translate an RPG book into a structured format like Markdown fairly naturally – it already has logical divisions, subsections, and reference-friendly formatting.

However, RPG books diverge from dry manuals by also weaving in creative and immersive content. While a programming guide or a legal text sticks to factual or procedural prose, a TTRPG rulebook also includes **evocative setting lore, thematic flavor text, and even short fiction**. For example, many *World of Darkness* rulebooks (by White Wolf) famously begin chapters with in-universe fiction vignettes – something “mainstream D&D books” historically didn’t do ³. These narrative passages (often termed “*fluff*” in RPG jargon) exist alongside the “crunch” of rules. The combination is unique: the book must both **instruct** (like a manual) and **inspire** (like a fantasy novel). It’s rare to find, say, a chemistry textbook that interjects short stories, or a legal code that provides imaginative lore – but in RPG texts this blend is commonplace. All content, whether mechanics or fiction, ultimately informs how the game is played. As one commentator put it, “everything in the game book is rules... all content in the game book tells you how to play,” whether via explicit mechanics or through setting context ³. This makes the RPG rulebook a **multimodal document** unlike any purely factual reference.

Heavy Use of Lists, Tables, and Charts

One immediately noticeable feature in TTRPG books is the **prevalence of tabular data** and lists. These games often involve extensive lists of items, abilities, spells, or outcomes best presented in table format for clarity. For example, a fantasy RPG rulebook might contain equipment price lists, skill difficulty charts,

random encounter tables, spell summaries, and monster statistics blocks – sometimes spanning many pages. Such dense tabular content is far less common in other genres of books. A forum post from a layout designer humorously noted they were formatting a RPG rulebook “with lots (and lots, and lots) of tables” ⁴, underscoring how ubiquitous tables are in these texts. By contrast, one wouldn’t expect a legal text or a literature book to contain dozens of data tables. Even technical manuals use tables sparingly compared to TTRPGs. The reliance on tables comes from the need to concisely present large sets of game data (e.g. armor types, weapon stats, experience point thresholds, random loot outcomes) in a way that gamemasters and players can quickly scan during play.

In addition to tables, **bullet-point lists and enumerations** are heavily used. Rules often read like step-by-step instructions or collections of options, which lend themselves to list formatting. For instance, a combat chapter might list the sequence of actions in a round, or a character creation section might present bullet points for each step. This list-centric approach again aligns with the book’s role as a reference that needs quick readability. In modern adventure modules, designers have even embraced **bullet-point summaries and bolded keywords** within room or scene descriptions so a Game Master (GM) can scan important information on the fly ⁵ ⁶. This is a shift from older adventure texts that were written in dense paragraphs; now the trend is to **present information more like a cheat-sheet or outline** for ease of use. Comparing a classic 1990s adventure’s page-long narrative description to a contemporary module’s concise bullet points illustrates this evolution – the latter treats the text “as a real-time tool for the GM,” not just prose ⁵. In summary, **structured data presentation** (via tables and lists) is a hallmark of TTRPG materials, setting them apart from most other book types and making them feel very “at home” in a structured text format.

Specialized Game Content: Stat Blocks and Notation

Beyond just tables, RPG books include specialized content forms that don’t appear in other rulebooks or reference works. A prime example is the **stat block** – a formatted chunk of data encapsulating a game entity’s attributes (like a monster, character, or item). Stat blocks typically use a consistent mini-layout of labels and values (e.g. for a monster: its species, combat stats, special abilities, etc.), sometimes arranged in a table or clearly demarcated section. This kind of structured data presentation is particular to games. It’s somewhat analogous to an entry in a technical catalog or a database, but is presented within the book’s flow for ease of reference during gameplay. For instance, a *Monster Manual* sourcebook might have hundreds of stat blocks, one for each creature – effectively a *reference within the reference*.

Another unique notation is the use of **dice notation and mathematical formulas embedded in text**. RPG rules are full of expressions like “roll 2d6 and add your Strength modifier” or “DC 15 Wisdom save.” This mix of natural language and symbolic notation (dice abbreviations, target numbers) is a quirk of TTRPG writing. It assumes the reader’s understanding of a mini-syntax that no other genre uses – outside maybe of probabilistic analysis texts. A legal document or a cookbook would never instruct you to roll polyhedral dice and consult an outcome chart, but RPG rulebooks do so routinely. This gives the text a *pseudo-technical* flavor, almost like reading a programming script or a mathematical word problem, yet it’s all in service of imaginary events in a game.

Because TTRPG books often have to enumerate numerous game options, you will also find many **categorical breakdowns and sub-sections**. For example, a character creation chapter might be subdivided by races, classes, skills, etc., each with their own mini-descriptions and perhaps summarized in a table. Similarly, rules sections often define terms in a glossary-like fashion throughout the text (e.g. defining

conditions like “stunned” or “invisible” in their own highlighted paragraphs). In this sense, the RPG rulebook behaves like a reference **encyclopedia of a fictional world** – cataloguing all the moving parts of the game. It’s a **comprehensive rules compendium** (especially in games with a lot of “crunch”), quite different from a typical board game rule pamphlet or a general reference book, which tend to be much shorter and less systematically exhaustive. The sheer *volume* of distinct entries (spells, monsters, abilities, etc.) in a RPG rulebook is a distinguishing factor in itself.

Integrating Narrative and Flavor Text

While RPG books have the trappings of a reference manual, they simultaneously deliver a narrative experience. Many include **rich setting lore, backstory, and flavor text** to establish the game’s world and tone. This might take the form of dedicated chapters describing the setting’s history and societies (almost like a mini history textbook, but fictional), or inlaid fiction snippets and sidebars giving a first-person perspective from characters in the world. *Campaign sourcebooks* (materials describing a world or campaign) especially read like a hybrid of a travel guide and a story anthology – they provide factual info about locations and factions, but also colorful legends, myths, and character vignettes to spark the reader’s imagination.

Notably, some RPG publishers have used **diegetic fiction** within rulebooks extensively. White Wolf’s *World of Darkness* books in the 1990s were “*distinctive – perhaps notorious – for using [fiction pieces]*” throughout their rulebooks ³. These might be short stories or in-character journals that convey the mood of playing a vampire or werewolf in their setting. Such segments don’t provide rules at all; instead they serve to immerse and inspire the reader. In contrast, “mainstream” RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* traditionally kept fiction to a minimum in core rulebooks, focusing more on rules and setting expository text ³. But even D&D includes flavor in more subtle ways – for example, through descriptive text for spells and magic items, or boxed “**example of play**” dialogues showing a sample game scene. These elements help illustrate how the game *feels* when played, beyond just listing mechanics.

This blending of instructional text with narrative content is a unique balancing act. **No other rule-centric genre** (like legal codes or engineering manuals) interpolates storytelling and thematic prose to this degree. The presence of “*fluff*” versus “*crunch*” in RPG circles is sometimes debated, but the modern understanding is that both serve a purpose. The lore and fiction convey the game’s *intended experience and themes*, effectively becoming an **integral part of the rules** in terms of guiding play style ³. For instance, a horror RPG might include diary excerpts or letters in an adventure module (evoking mood for the GM to channel), and those narrative bits indirectly instruct *how* to run a suspenseful game. In summary, TTRPG books are **multi-layered texts** – simultaneously databases of rules and storybooks for an imaginary universe.

Visual Layout and Design Elements

Unlike plain technical documents, TTRPG books often have striking visual layouts and artistic design elements. Full-color **illustrations** are ubiquitous – from cover art to interior drawings of characters, monsters, and locations. These images are not merely decorative; they help communicate “concepts that have no real-world analogue” (e.g. what a fantastical creature looks like) and set the tone of the game world ⁷ ⁸. Early RPG books started with relatively sparse art, but by the 3rd Edition D&D era (2000s), rulebooks had transformed into lavish, **illustrated tomes**. Wizards of the Coast in 3E “reimagined the rulebook not just as a reference manual, but as a ‘**coffee table book**’—a **luxury object designed to be**

beautiful enough to display” ⁹ . The layout in that era became highly stylized, “mimicking the look of a magical tome with faux-parchment backgrounds, ornate marginalia, and integrated diagrams” ¹⁰ . In other words, the book itself was made to look like an artifact from the game’s world, not a sterile manual. This is a sharp departure from how, say, a legal handbook is laid out (which would never use textured aged paper backgrounds or medieval fonts!).

Crucially, TTRPG layouts must balance **form and function**. There is often a tension between making the pages visually impressive and keeping them easily readable. The D&D 3E “coffee table” approach, for instance, was criticized for sometimes **prioritizing aesthetics over readability** – e.g. fancy fonts and busy page backgrounds that reduced legibility ¹¹ . This highlights a constant design decision in RPG books: *Should the layout lean into creative visual design (form), or maximize clarity and usability (function)?* Different games land in different places on this spectrum. Some modern indie RPGs push the limits of artistic layout – a trend sometimes called “artpunk” in the tabletop scene. A famously extreme example is *Mörk Borg*, a rules-light dark fantasy RPG whose pages are wild collages of neon-colored artwork, stylized typography, and unconventional layouts. It deliberately **rejects standard layout conventions**, using “chaotic, collage-like aesthetic... neon colors, distressed type, and high-contrast art to evoke a mood of doom and decay” ¹² . Such a book is visually striking and thematically on-point, but can be challenging to parse quickly for rules. On the other hand, a more traditional game like *Savage Worlds* or D&D 5th Edition uses a **clean two-column layout, consistent fonts, and ample whitespace** to ensure readability, even if the design looks more “textbook” and less flamboyant.



Example of the range of RPG layout styles: **Left:** A page from *Mörk Borg* (2020) showcasing its art-forward, “graphic design frenzy” approach – high-impact visuals and stylized text that convey atmosphere but demand careful reading ¹³ ¹² . **Right:** A more conventional layout from *Street Wolves* (a cyberpunk RPG using *Savage Worlds* rules) with a structured two-column format on a plain background ¹⁴ . The left prioritizes aesthetic immersion (form) whereas the right emphasizes organized readability (function).

This **dichotomy of boring-but-functional vs. beautiful-but-busy** is often discussed among RPG designers ¹⁵ . Many strive for a happy medium: an attractive design that remains easily navigable. Common

solutions include using **sidebars or boxed text** for asides and optional material (so they're visually separated from main rules), color-coding or icons to flag different types of content, and choosing thematic but legible fonts. The use of **columns and headings** helps break up information, and art is placed thoughtfully so as not to interrupt the flow of reading. Good layout is more than cosmetic – it directly affects how usable the book is during play. In fact, scholars of technical communication have noted that the layout of an RPG rulebook (how tables are nested, where the eye is drawn, use of bolding, etc.) acts as a form of “*procedural rhetoric*” that actually teaches the player how to interact with the game ¹⁶. For example, if a game consistently bolds key terms and action options, the reader learns to scan for those cues when running the game. In short, **visual design is intertwined with functionality** in TTRPG books to a degree not seen in standard reference materials.

Usability for Play: Designed for Quick Reference

A crucial difference between TTRPG rulebooks and other books is that RPG books are frequently referenced *in the middle of an activity*. Playing a game often involves flipping through the rulebook to find a rule, lookup a table, or read a scenario detail. This is akin to using a manual or guide *in action*, which means **usability and navigation are paramount**. Modern RPG books incorporate many design features to aid quick reference: comprehensive indexes, chapter thumb tabs or color edges, summary tables, and repetition of key charts on GM screens or at chapter ends. The content is organized both for an initial learn-through (like reading a textbook chapter by chapter) and for *non-linear access* later. By contrast, a legal text or typical non-fiction book isn't used in such a real-time, interrupt-driven way – lawyers might reference statutes, but not in the middle of a dramatic imaginative session with others depending on quick information! RPG books are more analogous to **instructional software or cookbooks** in this regard – they must anticipate the user needing to find specific info under pressure.

This has led to an increased focus on **information design** in RPG publishing. A recent trend, especially in the indie and Old-School Renaissance (OSR) scenes, is treating layout and formatting as part of the game's design mechanics. As one designer put it, “*a rule that is hard to find is a rule that slows down the game.*” Some OSR rulebooks and modules therefore adopt a “*control panel*” style layout – very structured, with grids, tables, and bullet points so that **all relevant information for a scenario is confined to one page or spread** for easy scanning ¹⁷. For example, *Old School Essentials* (an OSR retro-D&D game) is praised for its **strict two-column pages where each topic is presented in a self-contained, bullet-listed format**, often ensuring that you never have to turn a page during a single rule lookup ¹⁷. This philosophy views the rulebook as a “**dashboard for running a simulation, rather than a novel to be read**” ¹⁷. It's a design ethos borrowed from user experience (UX) design: treat the GM as a user who needs efficient data access, not as a reader enjoying prose. In adventure modules, this manifests as layouts with keyed maps on one page and corresponding room descriptions on the facing page, so a GM doesn't need to shuffle around the book during play ⁵. Techniques like **bolding important keywords, using icons or margin symbols** for commonly referenced elements (e.g. a small icon next to trap information or creature stats), and **including flowcharts or diagrams for complex procedures** all enhance in-play usability.

Contrast this with a legal text – while that might have an outline structure and numbering, it's not optimized for a user “in the moment.” In a legal context you have time to pore over details; in a TTRPG session, flow is important, so the rulebook's job is to deliver answers fast with minimal ambiguity. Some board game rulebooks do consider this (providing quick reference summaries), but TTRPGs, due to their volume of content and flexibility of play, have had to evolve a whole set of conventions for quick reference. Even simple additions like **example sidebars** (showing how a rule works in play) serve a dual purpose: they teach

the reader during initial learning and also act as clarifications one can point to later if confusion arises. In sum, the **usability factor** of RPG books is much more critical than in many other publications – they are more than books; they are *tools* at the gaming table. Good RPG design acknowledges this by presenting information in user-friendly ways (sometimes even releasing supplemental “rules reference” documents or screen-reader friendly PDFs for accessibility ¹ ¹⁵). This focus on practical usability sets RPG rulebooks apart from other richly formatted texts, which might not be handled under such dynamic conditions.

Crunchy vs. Narrative-Driven Books: A Study in Contrasts

Within the realm of TTRPGs, there is considerable variation in how the above features manifest. Rule-heavy (crunchy) games and rules-light, narrative-focused games often **approach book design very differently** – providing an illuminating contrast that the question specifically alludes to. For instance, consider *Blades in the Dark* or *World of Darkness* games versus an older edition of *Advanced D&D*. The former category (Blades, WoD, etc.) are more **story-driven, with streamlined mechanics**. They tend to use a single type of dice or a unified resolution system, and put more emphasis on guiding the storytelling. The rulebooks for these games often reflect that philosophy: they may be shorter, written in more conversational tone, and focused on **explaining when and why to do things in the narrative** rather than cataloguing every possible scenario with a rule. *World of Darkness* books, for example, devote many pages to mood-setting, advice on storytelling, and flexible guidelines, with relatively simple core mechanics (d10 dice pools with target numbers). As noted, they even include fiction to set the scene, underlining that “*RPGs are about storytelling, narrative, emotional highs and lows*,” in contrast to crunchy combat-focused play ¹⁸ ¹⁹ . Layout-wise, these narrative games might have fewer dense tables; instead you might see more sidebars of storytelling tips, and chapters on how to evoke theme or manage player character drama.

On the other hand, **crunch-heavy games** (like some editions of D&D, GURPS, Pathfinder, older AD&D) provide a *lot* of detailed rules and subsystems. Their rulebooks accordingly swell with pages of content: multiple **mechanics for combat, magic, equipment, world-building rules, etc.**, each with their own charts and exceptions. Some of the older editions of AD&D are sometimes tongue-in-cheek described as “form over function” in the sense that they present very complex, formalized rule structures that can appear obtuse or archaic by modern standards. For example, AD&D 2nd edition’s *Dungeon Master’s Guide* had extensive tables for random dungeon generation, NPC reactions, and even to determine a character’s height and weight – thorough, but not always *user-friendly*. The layout in such books often prioritized cramming in information over aesthetic spacing; you might find smaller font, tighter lines, and minimal white space to fit all the content (a stark difference from a narrative game book that might be comfortable with more white space and fewer total rules). These crunchy tomes sometimes fell into the trap of **information overload**, where the sheer density could impede quick reference – the very definition of leaning too far into content “form” at the expense of functional ease. As one analysis of D&D 3rd Edition noted, the designers attempted to merge rich narrative elements with mechanical depth, but “*the sheer density of the rules often fought against the visual presentation*” ²⁰ . In other words, a crunch-heavy book can become unwieldy, and if paired with heavy visual design (textured backgrounds, etc.), it magnifies the usability issues ¹¹ .

Modern publishers are aware of these pitfalls and have taken different approaches. For example, Pathfinder (a famously crunchy game) addressed it by splitting content into multiple books (Core Rulebook, Bestiary, Gamemastery Guide, etc.) and by using a clear textbook-like layout with bold headers and many sidebars to break up information. Meanwhile, rules-light indie games often embrace minimalist layout – some fit on a pamphlet or one page – because their selling point is *simplicity*. A great comparison is highlighted by *Honey*

Heist, a one-page RPG, which a new player found immediately approachable compared to the intimidating 300-page D&D rulebook ²¹ ²² . The one-page RPG sacrifices depth for **instant clarity** (literally everything on one sheet), whereas D&D's depth comes with the cost of a massive rulebook that demands study. Neither approach is "right" or "wrong" – they serve different audiences – but they illustrate how **the content density of a game directly influences the structure and style of its rulebook**.

In summary, TTRPG rulebooks vary widely along the spectrum from highly **formal, rule-dense manuals** to **free-flowing, narrative guides**, but in all cases they maintain certain core features (tables, structured sections, mixing of prose and rules) that make them recognizable as RPG books. This combination of *structured reference material* with *creative narrative and visual design* is what truly distinguishes TTRPG books from other genres of writing. They must teach and inform like a manual, inspire like a story, and function as a practical game aid – all at once. Few other publications juggle these roles, which is why the study of RPG rulebook design can feel like "a study in contrasts" and a domain ripe for developing its own design language (much like Christopher Alexander's pattern language, but for game books).

Comparison to Other Reference Works

To directly address the comparison: **How do TTRPG books differ from other rulebooks, legal texts, or reference materials?**

- **Purpose and Tone:** Legal texts and standard reference books aim for a neutral, factual tone and singular purpose (to inform or record laws, etc.). TTRPG books, by contrast, have a *prescriptive* purpose (teaching rules) but also an *entertaining* and *evocative* purpose (bringing a fictional world to life). The tone of RPG writing often strikes a balance between instructive clarity and conversational or dramatic flair. It's not uncommon for a rulebook to crack a joke or speak in-character to the reader – unimaginable in a legal code or engineering standard.
- **Visual Presentation:** Other reference works are typically minimalistic in design – black text on white paper, maybe some diagrams. TTRPG books are often full-color with illustrations on nearly every other page and decorative motifs. For example, a law handbook will never have a full-page painting of a dragon or a sci-fi city to set the mood, but an RPG core book almost certainly will. Even compared to other hobby rulebooks (like those for board games or war games), RPG books are longer and more art-heavy. They are meant to be **engaging reads as well as references**, whereas most rulebooks for a board game are short, purely instructional pamphlets. The length of a TTRPG core book (hundreds of pages) and its use of storytelling art place it in a different category.
- **Structure and Navigation:** Legal texts have their own strict structure (numbered statutes, subclauses) which is a very different kind of organization – highly granular and cross-referenced, but not designed for casual browsing or quick learning. A person typically refers to a specific clause in law; they don't read a law book cover-to-cover for enjoyment. RPG books, even though used as reference, are more *friendly* to read through and often encourage reading in sequence at least once (many have a "What is Roleplaying?" intro chapter to ease new readers in). The presence of an index is common to both legal texts and RPG books, but RPG books also use many of the pedagogical layout tools of textbooks (headings, examples, summaries) to facilitate both learning and referencing. In short, RPG rulebooks blend **instructional design** (like a manual) with the **extensive cross-referencing** of a reference work, plus additional narrative framing – something a legal text doesn't do (law books don't have to teach you how to "use" the law; they just codify it).

- **Tabular Content:** As the question astutely pointed out, TTRPG books contain far more tabular content than most other genres. Legal texts seldom use tables – they rely on prose and structured numbering. Technical reference books might include the occasional table or chart, but an RPG book is riddled with them: from character ability tables to encounter matrices. The *type* of information in RPG tables is also unique (fictional data about imaginary worlds) versus factual data in real-world references. This means RPG tables often serve to **randomize or provide options** (roll results, lists of names or events) rather than to strictly present empirical data. They're a tool for creativity as much as information – another distinction from tables in, say, a scientific handbook.
- **Updating and Optional Rules:** Another subtle difference is that RPG texts often include **optional rules, variants, and designer notes** about different ways to play. These are sometimes set apart in sidebars or clearly marked as non-core rules ²³ ²⁴ . Such a concept has no real analogue in a legal text or a typical manual (imagine a law book saying “Optionally, you may follow this clause if you feel like it!” – it doesn't happen). RPGs acknowledge a flexibility and invite house rules; the books often explicitly state that GMs can modify rules. This makes them *less rigid* documents than legal codes, which are absolute by nature. From a layout perspective, it introduces the need to differentiate core rules from optional notes – leading to those colored boxes and side note sections that are a common sight in RPG books ²³ .

In essence, **TTRPG books stand at a crossroads between manuals, literature, and art books**. They have the structured skeleton of a reference manual, the imaginative flesh of a novel, and the visual dressing of an art book or comic. No other genre combines these in quite the same way. Little wonder that understanding their design can require its own “design language” or set of patterns, as the user suggests by invoking *A Timeless Way of Building*. Just as Christopher Alexander spoke of a *pattern language* in architecture, we can observe recurring patterns in RPG book design: e.g., “The Two-Page Spread Rule” (keep linked info on facing pages), “The Sidebar Trick” (isolate tangents in separate boxes), “The Chapter Fiction Intro,” “The Monster Stat Block Format,” and so on. Identifying and codifying these patterns could indeed form a fascinating design language unique to TTRPG publishing.

Conclusion

TTRPG rulebooks and sourcebooks are a *genre of their own*, with distinguishing features that reflect their unique purpose. They are simultaneously **rule references** and **immersive world guides**, requiring a careful balance of clarity and creativity. Features like multi-column layouts, abundant tables, stat blocks, and quick-reference tools give them the functional utility akin to technical documents ¹ ⁴ . At the same time, storytelling elements, lush artwork, and imaginative flourishes set them apart from any mundane manual ¹⁰ ³ . The continual tug-of-war between *form and function* in their design results in a wide spectrum of styles – from the minimalist, no-nonsense layouts optimized for usability ¹⁷ , to the extravagant “art-punk” layouts that treat each page as a canvas ¹² . All these traits make TTRPG books **rich, complex documents** that echo textbooks and technical guides on one page, and graphic novels or screenplay scripts on the next. In short, they have evolved a distinctive format to meet the distinctive needs of their readers – who are not just readers, but *players* engaged in an interactive experience. This is what truly differentiates TTRPG rulebooks from other written works, and why analyzing them can unearth insights relevant to design, literacy, and even the future of interactive documentation ¹⁶ . They are, as one writer beautifully dubbed, “**a paper computer that runs on the most powerful graphics engine in existence: the human imagination**,” bridging the gap between rigid rules and the boundless creativity of play ²⁵ ²⁶ .

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