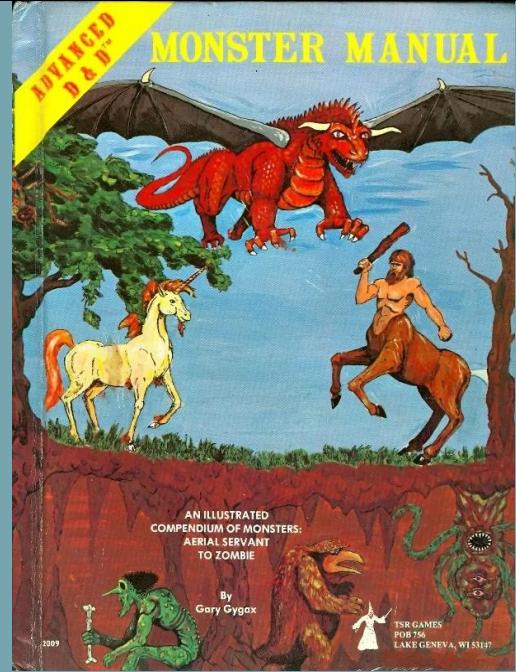


## The Historical, Cultural, and Social Significance of Games (part 2):

- TTRPGs and Game Communities
- Representation in games
- Game Communities
- Impact of games on social interactions and relationships

IDEA 130 // 09.17.2024 & 09.19.24 // Week 4 //



Earliest published edition of AD&D Monster Manual

# The Dungeons & Dragons Players of Death Row

For a group of men in a Texas prison, the fantasy game became a lifeline — to their imaginations, and to one another.



Tony Ford in the Allan B. Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas, in 2021. Miranda Barnes for The New York Times

Research and text from The Marshall Project:

<https://www.themarshallproject.org/2023/08/31/dungeons-and-dragons-texas-death-row-tdci>

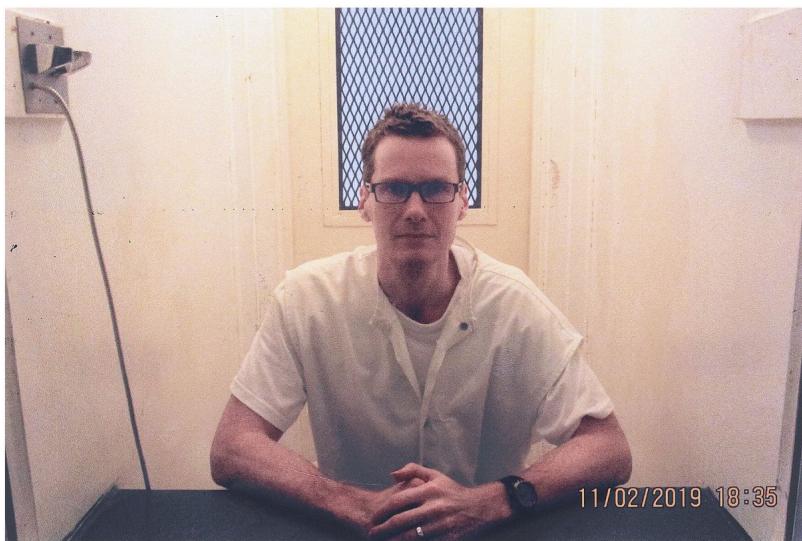
The Marshall Project - Mission statement:

"The Marshall Project is a nonpartisan, nonprofit news organization that seeks to create and sustain a sense of national urgency about the U.S. criminal justice system. We have an impact on the system through journalism, rendering it more fair, effective, transparent and humane.

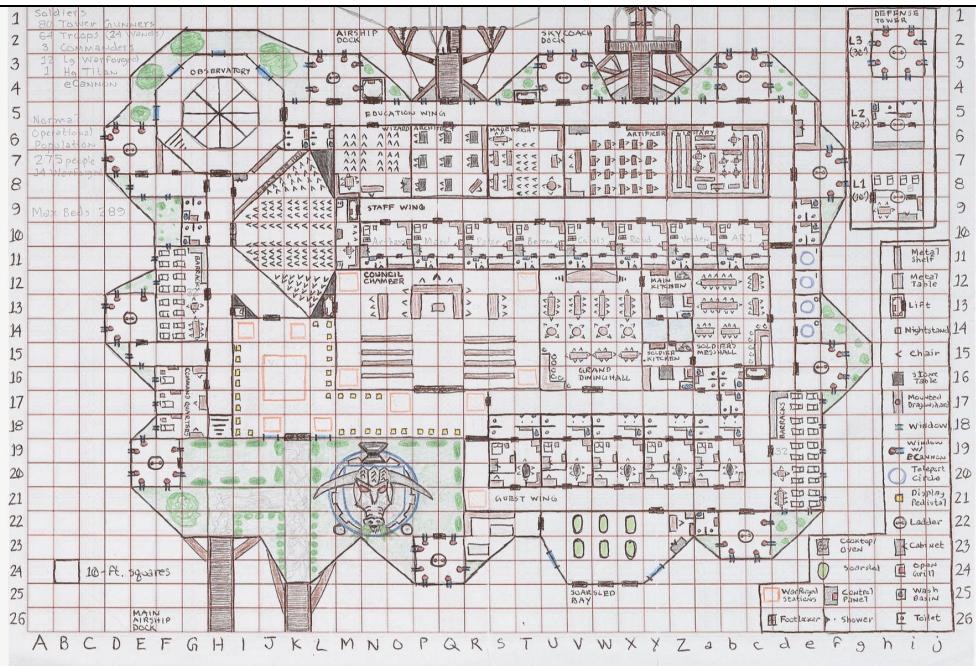
"There is bipartisan agreement that the criminal justice system needs reform. Our reporting has shown that it perpetuates racial and economic inequities, costs taxpayers billions of dollars a year, and is toxic to those it incarcerates — and often to those who work in it. Police, courts and prisons are repositories of crises they are ill-equipped to handle, including mental illness, addiction and poverty. And victims of crime often feel re-traumatized by a system that is supposed to protect them.

"Although we are not advocates, The Marshall Project often spurs change. Our journalism exposes wrongs, bringing them to the attention of officials who can take action. We give visibility to proposals and critiques from the criminal justice community. And we try to set an example for other media to cover criminal justice issues fairly and responsibly.

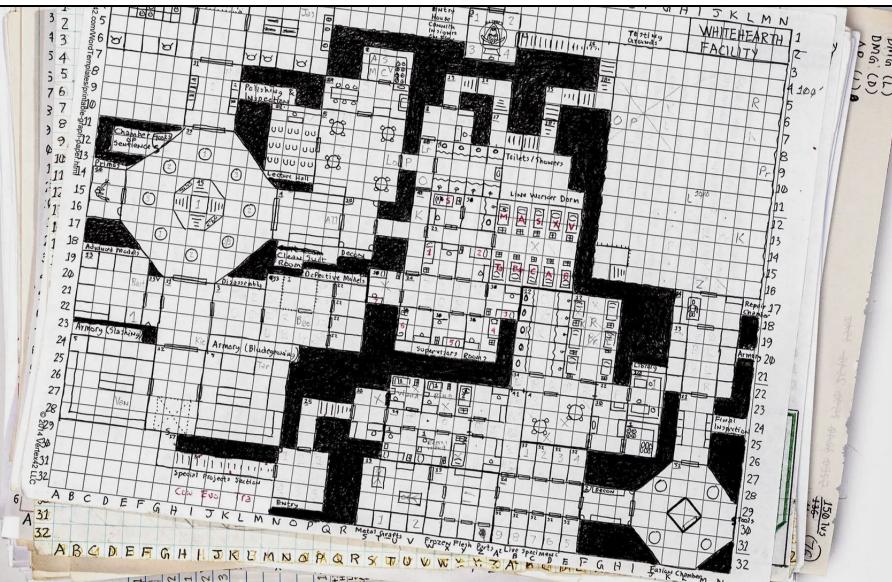
"We partner with both national and local media outlets to reach diverse audiences who can be awakened to the issue. Our journalism informs criminal justice experts who need fresh and accurate information to do their best work. We also aim to serve and engage the millions of people whose lives have been ensnared in the criminal justice system, and whom the media have too often neglected and marginalized."



Billy Wardlow in 2019. He was executed the following year. Wardlow ran D.&D. games on death row, often serving as Dungeon Master and a mentor to the other players.  
From Dani Allen



One character Wardlow became known for among his death-row peers was Arthaxx d'Cannith, a magical prodigy raised by tutors who went on to graduate early from a prestigious wizarding college. GLENNA GORDON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



For these players, the games served as their life-skills course, anger-management class and drug counseling, too. Glenna Gordon for The New York Times



Some of Billy Wardlow's Dungeons & Dragons maps, character sheets and campaign notes from his time on death row. His cardboard game spinner is at center. Glenna Gordon for The New York Times



greenerarrow · 1y ago

Thanks for posting, I actually skipped it when I was scrolling the NYT today. A couple things:

1. How the hell are some of these people sentenced to death? Dumb and young and may deserve to spend some time behind bars, but not die for it.
2. It is unconscionable that we treat humans this way, especially when at the end of it we are going to take their actual lives away.
3. This game grows in lots of places where people feel lonely. We dissect it and criticize it for a million different things, but there is a reason it is worth actually loving.



61



Share

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thejadedfalcon · 1y ago

How the hell are some of these people sentenced to death?

Because a lot of Americans have somehow convinced themselves that their blood hunger is actually just a quest for justice. That it's cheaper and cleaner to kill people for things they often didn't even do. That the law is always 100% right and you should never question it.



SyntheticGod8 · 1y ago

DM

A friend of mine brought D&D to a secure treatment ward where we both were. I passed it on to a player before I left.

Part of me hopes (probably beyond hope) that it's still being passed down alongside stories of their adventures.



2



Award



Share

...



## Game History Example: Tabletop Role-Playing Games (or TTRPGs)

- Sometimes called “pen and paper games”
  - Often (but not always!) has a Game Master (or GM) that organizes play
  - Often uses different randomization methods to create more “unpredictable” play
  - Much of play is for the interpretation of the GM, who guides (and is guided by) player action
  - Important terms:
    - PC (player character) and NPC (non-player character)
    - GM (Game Master, often has different names in different game systems)
    - Critical (rolling the best or worst, interpreted as “critical fail” or “critical hit/success,” or “crit”)
- 

A tabletop role-playing game (typically abbreviated as TRPG or TTRPG) is a classification for a role-playing game (RPG) in which the participants describe their characters' actions through speech. Participants determine the actions of their characters based on their characterization, and the actions succeed or fail according to a set formal system of rules and guidelines. Within the rules, players have the freedom to improvise; their choices shape the direction and outcome of the game.

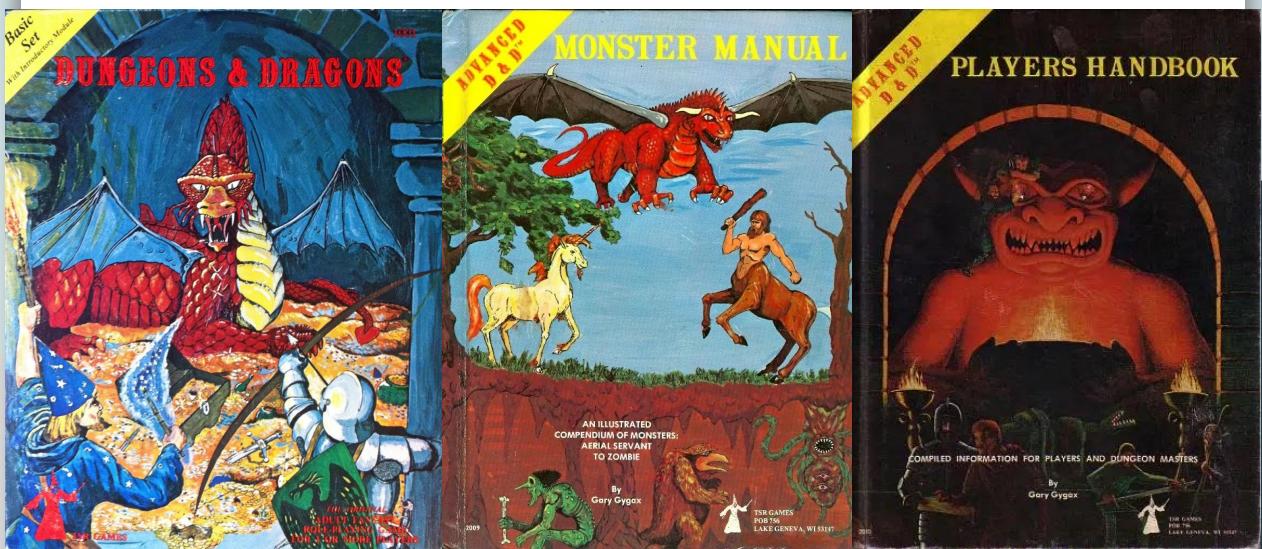
Many TTRPGs have a game master (or GM, though individual games usually have their own names for such a role) who organizes, encourages, and "referees" events. Most attribute this kind of action as coming from the most widely-accepted progenitor of the genre, Dungeons and Dragons.



Chaturanga, Kriegspiel, Stratego, war miniatures, "serious gaming," a U.S. Marine Corps wargame exercise, war reenactors

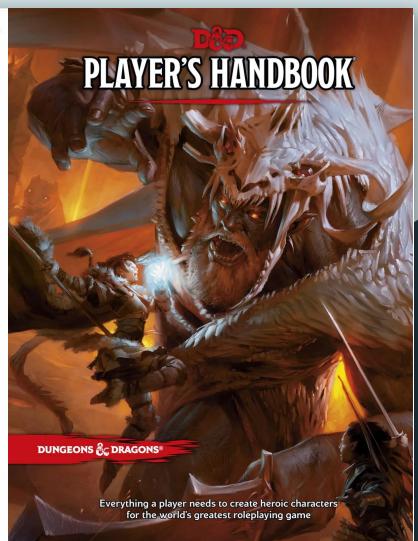
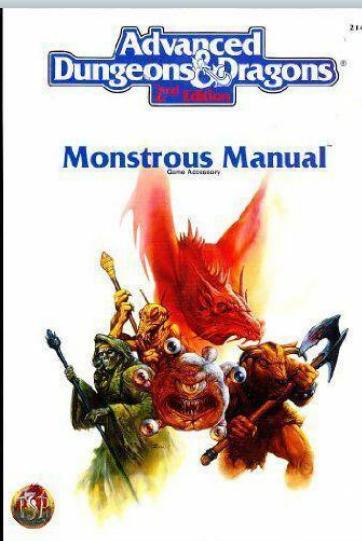
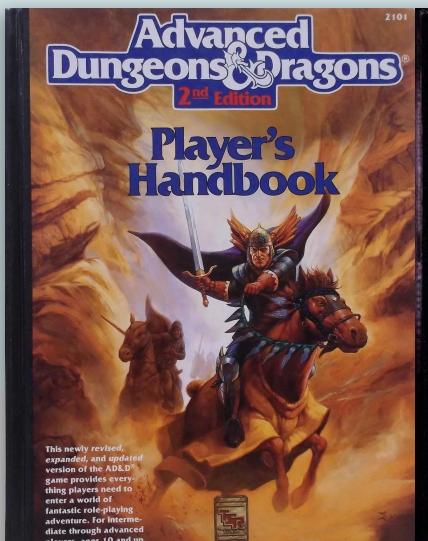
Most histories describing early roleplaying games attribute wargaming as the originally root of TTRPGs, particularly ancient strategy games like Chaturanga (chess; consider how each of the pieces is a "character"), and much later Strategos and a miniature war-game called Chainmail (1971).

"Theater games," progenitors of improvisation theater, and historical reenactment groups also played a role in the development of TTRPGs.

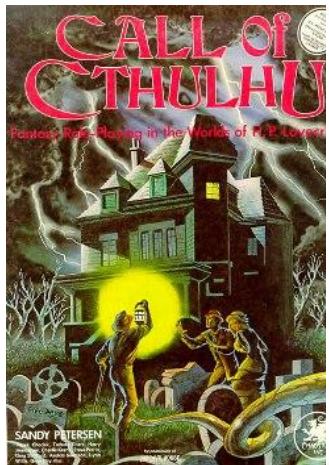


Early editions of published Dungeons & Dragons (and “Advanced Dungeons & Dragons)

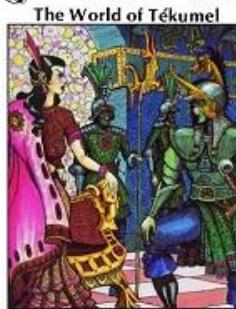
Dungeons & Dragons, developed in 1974 by Dave Arneson and E. Gary Gygax and published by Gygax's company, TSR, was the first commercially available role-playing game, though at the time its first printing was marketed as a niche wargaming product. Gygax expected to sell about 50,000 copies total to a strictly hobbyist market. After establishing itself in boutique stores, it developed a strong, lasting fan base that distinguished itself from the typical wargame player base. By the time of its first major reprinting in 1977, Dungeons & Dragons was refocused as a role-playing game to segregate it from the typical wargame.



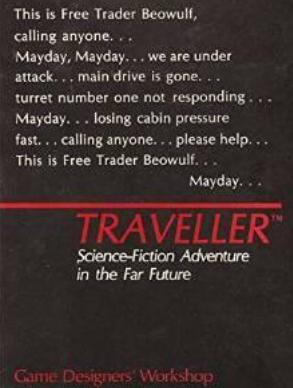
My first entrance into D&D (Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd Edition); the current 5th Edition



### Empire of the Petal Throne



M.A.R. Barker  
Rules for Fantasy Adventures  
and Campaigns on an Alien Planet  
THE EXCELSIOR FOUNDATION



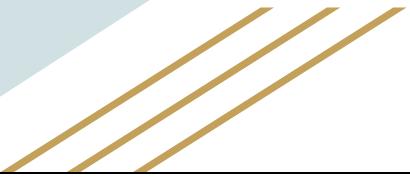
Other influential early TTRPG systems: Empire of the Petal Throne, Call of Cthulhu, Traveller

Other TTRPGs that were invented around this time were M A R Barker's Empire of the Petal Throne, which originated the concept of the "critical hit" and "critical fail" game mechanic; notably, Barker was a U of Minn professor of ancient languages, and based his fantasy realm off of various ancient middle-eastern and south asian peoples and languages. Traveller, designed by Marc Miller (1977) originated the science-fiction adventure in TTRPG (and was recently re-released by Mongoose publishing!) and is infamous for the possibility of a character dying during the "character creation" phase of the game.

"Call of Cthulhu" is the longest-running horror-themed game, and originated the Basic Role-Playing (BRP) system (1981). Since Chaosium has first published the rules for the game, many tweaks to more questionable, racist/sexist content was addressed, and a certain amount of contextual information about Lovecraft and the Eldridge Mythos is always included in preambles to CoC content. In fact, whole scenarios and investigations have been introduced to directly challenge past materials, including "Harlem Unbound" (taking place during the Harlem Renaissance and establishing influential African American characters in canon).



## Critical Analysis: TTRPG Strengths

- Encourages collaborative storytelling and problem solving
  - Allows Huizinga's "non-reality" space where it's safe to experiment without judgment
  - Often serves as the first space a pre-teen or teenager has prime agency over events, and can show mastery
  - Often can serve as a way to develop deep friendships
  - Most TTRPGs—D&D included—have non-human characters that allow for a more diverse, less rigid play experience than other traditional games
- 

## Critical Analysis: TTRPG Weaknesses

- Historical weakness: since D&D is based upon wargames and Tolkeinian folklore (and thus, solely northern european representation), themes of colonialism and racism have historically made TTRPG a predominantly white, male space
  - Often white, male-dominated spaces are the breeding ground for white supremacy recruitment (see: MMORPGs and radical recruitment)
  - Even non-D&D TTRPG systems have dealt with historical racism (see: Call of Cthulhu and its problematic relationship with H.P. Lovecraft)
- 1980s “Satanic Panic”

How can we get rid of these weaknesses, and/or turn them into strengths?

https://chirinebakal.proboards.com/thread/544/amina-inloes-paper-prof-barker

237 M.A.R. Barker, creator of Tékumel and Empire of the Petal Throne, wrote a neo-Nazi novel in 1991.

The book was called Serpent's Walk, and was published by the same company that published infamous neo-Nazi book The Turner Diaries. This has been known by a few people for a couple of years, or possibly longer. A former archivist for The Tekumel Foundation posted the following in 2020:

"I had had no idea that this book existed until I found the manuscript, the original publishing contract, the photocopy of the payment check, and the proof book in amongst Phil's papers. I secured all this material for the Tekumel Foundation as an archivist, at that time under contract with them, and the last I saw of it was when it was put back on their shelves. It was still on their shelves when I did the photo inventory of Phil's collection in the fall of 2012 after I did not renew my dollar-a-year contract with them. (I had the data I collect; I set it in the context I find it, and let others evaluate it. My reaction to it, which I have never told anyone, was that what had been done was terrible and that it was a violation of my principles. What had been done was terrible and that it was a violation of my principles."

The above post can be seen at a Tekumel themed forum here (registration required). <https://chirinebakal.proboards.com/thread/544/amina-inloes-paper-prof-barker>

And getting rid of it will take a lot of work.

**D&D Must Grapple With the Racism in Fantasy**

"ORCS ARE HUMAN beings who can be slaughtered without conscience or apology." This damning assessment of one of fantasy's most ubiquitous villains comes from N. K. Jemisin, titan of modern fantasy and slayer of outdated genre tropes. As "kinda-sorta-people," she writes, orcs are "fruit of the poison vine that is human fear of 'the Other.'" The only way to respond to their existence is to control them or remove them.

What is an orc? To their creator, J. R. R. Tolkien, they are "squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes; in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types." More than half a century after Tolkien wrote that description in a letter, here is how Dungeons & Dragons describes the orc in the latest *Monster Manual*, where all such demi-humans are relegated: "Orcs are savage raiders and pillagers with stooped postures, low foreheads, and piggish faces." Half-orcs, which are

**TRENDING**

**Wizards Gather!**



Tanya founded I Need Diverse Games, a not-for-profit foundation based in Chicago dedicated to better diversification of all aspects of gaming. She is also a writer, Twitch partner, and diversity consultant on games such as Far Cry: New Dawn and Wandersong.

"I need diverse games" with Tanya DePass: VGA Fireside

DePass' history:

- She hashtaged "I need diverse games," back in 2015: and it took off—there was a bigger conversation to be had. The hashtag actually trended; she began getting media attention, going to conventions, and once she lost her job in higher ed, she decided to throw it all in

Patreon for the org "I Need Diverse Games" where she writes, speaks, consults, etc. for games that have more diverse representation and audiences.

- Learning how to write for games is WAY different than writing literature or regular narrative dialogue; it's much more like scriptwriting

14:22 = Actual play footage of Into the Mother Lands (season 2; combat session with space squids) using Cortex game rules

- customized Cortex roleplaying system

How to customize a game system to represent you and your collaborators better?

Explanation: 16:30 - "Into the Mother Lands" 14th Century emperor of Mali: Mansa Musa (Musa I of Mali) was the ruler of the kingdom of Mali from 1312 C.E. to 1337 C.E. During his reign, Mali was one of the richest kingdoms of Africa, and Mansa Musa was among the richest individuals in the world.



## Creative Director – Tanya DePass

Tanya DePass is the founder and Director of [I Need Diverse Games](#), a not-for-profit organization based in Chicago, which is dedicated to better diversification of all aspects of gaming. I Need Diverse Games serves the community by supporting marginalized developers attend the Game Developer Conference by participating in the [GDC Scholarship program](#), helps assist attendance at other industry events, and is seeking partnership with

organizations and initiatives. Tanya is a lifelong Chicagoan who loves everything about gaming, [#INeedDiverseGames](#) spawn point, and wants to make it better and more inclusive for everyone. She's part of the [Rivals of Waterdeep](#) live play stream on [twitch.tv/rivalsofwaterdeep](https://twitch.tv/rivalsofwaterdeep), a partnered Twitch variety broadcaster; and often speaks on issues of diversity, feminism, race, intersectionality & other topics at conventions.



<https://ineeddiversegames.org>

<https://motherlandsrpq.com/>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-YeiDnEl8E&list=PLRiPKy\\_JavkF4Wir3RofdlXwnm42wzmP4&index=9](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-YeiDnEl8E&list=PLRiPKy_JavkF4Wir3RofdlXwnm42wzmP4&index=9)

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Other examples:

"Pretending to be People": using "Delta Green" rules (an offshoot of Call of Cthulhu; uses a D100 system); house rules change "rolling Sanity" to "rolling 'Grip"'; so instead of using problematic representations of mental illness/neurodivergency/etc. they roll for "grip" to see how much present events unsettle or disrupt the player character's actions.

\* For example, a PC (in Delta Green, characters are usually researchers, in law enforcement/government agencies, or other fields useful for an organization that deals with paranormal and occult events) is tasked with locating a suspicious character's (or, NPC's) apartment. Even though they know the city well, they find that the address they are given simply doesn't exist (the listed street's house numbers jump, and no house with the listed address is there). Confused, they force the NPC to lead them to their house. The NPC leads them right to their home, at the address listed. Now there is a house that corresponds to the number, which was not there before (they have pictures and everything). The NPC states that they've lived there for

years, and no one has problems finding the house and denies anything is wrong. PC rolls for "grip."