“It Has to Ignite Their Creativity”: Opportunities for Generative Tools for Game Masters

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe the results of interviews we conducted with experienced game masters (GMs) of tabletop role-playing games. In these interviews they discussed the challenges they face preparing and running game sessions, as well as the tools they use. From these interviews, we used qualitative analysis to discover three guidelines for designing generative tools for GMs: 1. provide inspiration, not answers; 2. allow for customization of the generative possibilities; 3. prioritize ease of use (speed, portability, and online accessibility) in design. While there are some limitations to our approach which we describe in this paper, we found these rules summarized the needs of the GMs we interviewed and provide useful advice for those interested in designing generative tools for GMs.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → Computers in other domains; Personal computers and PC applications; Computer games; • **Human-centered computing** → Human computer interaction (HCI); Interactive systems and tools.

KEYWORDS

Tabletop role-playing games, Procedural content generation, Creativity support tools

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1 INTRODUCTION

Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs), such as Dungeons & Dragons [8], Apocalypse World [3], and Call of Cthulhu [13], represent a rich intersection of storytelling, improvisation, and social interaction. In TTRPGs, players collaboratively create a narrative, which often takes place over many consecutive game sessions. Players may use a variety of tools such as maps, dice, figurines, and information sheets, to aid in game play. TTRPGs are often asymmetric, with one player known as the Game Master (GM), or Dungeon Master (DM), taking on an administrative role in the game and responsibility for controlling all non-player characters (NPCs), determining the outcome of interaction in the game world, and controlling the shape of the overall narrative.

Studying the design space of TTRPGs can be extremely insightful as, “these games are highly complex, both in terms of narrative structure and their social interaction” [6]. In most cases, the GM is responsible for creating the general narrative framework for a campaign, similar to how an author will create a story for a novel. However, GMs must also be prepared to dynamically adapt their stories according to the individual actions of other players. As a result, the creative space of TTRPGs is a unique combination of static authoring processes (such as researching, outlining, and writing) and dynamic practices (such as collaborative storytelling and improvisational theater). This combination presents unique challenges which require processes that support this type of storytelling. For instance, instead of preparing a single static storyline, many GMs prepare multiple branches of a narrative or a possibility space for the narrative, allowing them to adapt to how players may change the story during play.

Preparing for a game that makes use of more than a single, static storyline can be time consuming, and is typically done outside of the game sessions. Once the narrative space is designed, the GM also facilitates the game play sessions themselves, describing how the game world (and the characters within it) respond to the player’s actions, and dynamically adapting the story to incorporate the player’s choices. This makes the GM’s role a powerful one, but also time consuming and it comes with unique challenges.

To help address the challenges GMs may face, our research focuses on understanding the needs of GMs and particularly when creating tools for their use. To accomplish this, we interviewed eight experienced GMs in the United States and Europe to understand existing practices and explore what challenges GMs face preparing and facilitating play. After analyzing the data from these interviews, we created a set of design guidelines for creating generative tools for GMs: 1. provide inspiration, not answers; 2. allow for customization of the generative possibilities; 3. prioritize ease of use (speed, portability, and online accessibility) in design.

In this paper, we share the related work and methods used in our approach before describing the results of our interviews and

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discussing our design guidelines outlined above. Finally, we explore the limitations and future work before sharing our conclusions.

2 RELATED WORK

TTRPGs are a fascinating narrative space that combine storytelling and improvisational practices, and therefore quite a bit of research has been done to study that narrative space and TTRPGs in general. For example, Bergström provides frameworks in which we can situate and compare the storytelling practices of TTRPGs with other games [4], Tychsen, et al. discuss the player roles and challenges that are unique to TTRPGs [15], and Guzdial, et al. provide an argument that TTRGs can be viewed as procedural content generators [7].

For our research, we are specifically interested in tools, and there are a number of commercial and academic tools available to support TTRPG players. These range from online tools which help organize and facilitate game sessions such as Roll20 [17] and Foundry Virtual Tabletop [18] to analog tools such as dice rolling tables, campaign books with pre-made adventures, and supplementary books such as *The Tome of Beasts* which includes stat blocks and descriptions for 400+ potential monsters for players to encounter [9].

The *Tome of Beasts* in particular highlights the use of generative tools. GMs are required to create a large amount of content for the games, both in and out of game sessions, and because of this, generative tools are often used to help design characters, treasures, monsters, environments, quests, and more. For example, one of the more popular websites of this nature is donjon.bin.sh [19], an online collection of free, lightweight tools for generating names, maps, and loot, among others. Other generative tools may be used for the RPG system itself, such as Vecchione's Improv Toolkit [16], a setup which includes a sampling of other generative tools, each with a specific purpose. Although all these artifacts differ in quality and level of depth, their common purpose is to aid users in the creative process by giving them access to tools that generate content, while also allowing other users to contribute and modify the processes with their own aesthetics.

Beyond these commercial tools, research also exists regarding generative tools for TTRPGs. For example, map generation tools such as the work by Hery and Drew focuses on generative TTRPG maps using visual signifiers and allowing live editing [10]. Similar to our research, Horswill followed casual creator design concepts to create *Imaginarium,* a declarative procedural content generation (PCG) system for TTRPGs [11]. *Imaginarium* allows users to define their own PCG systems using declarative programming.

While these systems are promising, for our work we are not interested in one tool in particular, but rather interested in understanding what types of tools GMs wished they had. While we were conducting our interviews, Acharya, et al. were conducting their own interviews with GMs around designing support tools [1, 2]. While we were both conducting interviews focused on the process of GMing, their interviews focused on creating a digital assistant for running games. In our research, we are interested in developing generative tools to aid in GMing, which led us to focus on different aspects of the GMs role during play sessions and preparation.

Table 1: Approximate number of years of experience playing TTRPGs and being the GM, per participant.

Participant ID	TTRPG Experience	GM Experience
P1	35 years	35 years
P3*	30 years	30 years
P4	12 years	10 years
P5	10 years	5 years
P6	38 years	25 years
P7	15 years	10 years
P8	9 years	7 years
P9	35 years	5 years

* Data from participant 2 was removed from the study and not shown here due to the participant joining the research team during data analysis.

3 METHODS

To conduct this research, we initially ran an online survey through Qualtrics with 89 participants in 12 countries (publication forthcoming) asking for general information about participants' experience with Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs) and Game Mastering (GMing). The survey also included a link to a secondary form, which allowed participants to provide their name and email if they had interest in a follow-up interview, while retaining anonymity of their survey responses. Both the survey and the interview procedures were reviewed and approved by Georgia Tech's IRB office.

We emailed everyone who had expressed interest in a follow-up interview, and scheduled interviews with those who responded that they were still interested and had time available, which gave us a pool of 9 participants. We conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with these participants through Zoom. The overall goal of the interviews was to better understand how GMs in TTRPGs approached preparation and running game sessions, the challenges they faced, and the tools they used. We also introduced our design idea for a tarot-based tool and asked follow-up questions about the tool, the discussion of which is outside the scope of this paper. For this paper, we are focusing primarily on the questions related to the GMs' tool use. A list of the questions we asked during the interviews can be found in Appendix A.

Participant 2 joined the research team after their interview but before analysis had begun, so their interview was removed from our data prior to the analysis phase. Our interview participants all have substantial experience both playing TTRPGs and being a GM. The approximate number of years of experience for our participants is shown in Table 1. The number of years of experience is approximated, as there were sometimes gaps in play or trouble remembering the length of time.

Our data analysis was informed by Saldaña [14], we performed first and second cycle qualitative coding, with two members of the research team iteratively reviewing and coding each interview until intercoder agreement was reached. As new codes were found in subsequent interviews, they were added to the code book. Once all interviews were initially coded, all previous interviews were reviewed using the updated code book. From our code book, we created groupings of codes to form our categories. We then used

Table 2: Categories related to tool use and their associated codes.

Categories	Codes
Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TTRPG) Experience	TTRPG Systems Played
	TTRPG Likes
	TTRPG Dislikes
	Personal Anecdotes
Game Master (GM) Practices	GM-Prepared Content
	Inspiration Sources
	In-Game Challenges
GM Tools	Tools Used
	Tool Platform
	Tool Frequency
	Tool Purpose
	Tool Likes
	Tool Dislikes

these categories as thematic lenses to revisit the data and identify specifics and nuances within that theme.

4 RESULTS AND DESIGN GUIDELINES

For this paper, we are focusing on the interview answers that discuss the tool use and needs for Game Masters (GMs) of Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs). Revisiting the data through the theme of tool use, we found 3 categories across our codes that were relevant, with 13 codes making up these categories (although not all the codes were relevant to this particular topic). The categories and codes are shown in Table 2.

We identified these three categories as being related because: a participant's experience level would affect how many tools they may have tried as well as what tools they might need; the practice of GMing is the area in which the tool use we are interested in would occur; and any information about tools GMs use would be salient. When revisiting the data through the lens of tool use, three themes emerged from the interviews as to the ways GMs relate to the tools they use, and what they are looking for. We used these themes directly to create the following design guidelines for creating generative tools for GMs of TTRPGs:

- Provide inspiration, not answers.
- Allow for customization of the generative possibilities.
- Prioritize ease of use (speed, portability, and online accessibility) in design.

4.1 Inspiration, Not Answers

One theme that was repeated throughout our interviews, was that of creativity. As P6 stated, "A lot of GMs get their creative outlet from creating their own worlds, creating their own the stories." P1 backs this up when they said, "I absolutely adore the creation of— like I said, I create the worlds, I create the cultures and the political aspects and all the characters." Therefore, when using tools, the GMs we interviewed were looking for inspiration for their own creativity, not for the tool to do the creation themselves. All but one of the GMs we interviewed mentioned they currently use generative tools in some way, with the caveat that the GMs would use the output as inspiration, with only one GM saying that they sometimes use the generated object as-is. For example, when P1 was discussing tool use, they remarked, "It can't hand them everything. It has to ignite their creativity." A specific example of this comes from P3, who stated, "I use [random generators] by randomly pulling things over and over until I see something that sparks an idea in my head, and I go with whatever spark came out of it rather than exactly what it says."

4.1.1 Levels of Specificity. Six of the eight GMs we interviewed specifically mentioned an experience when they stopped using a particular tool because the tool's output didn't fit, or couldn't be made to fit, within the scope of their game. This leads to a quandary, as described by P4, "Then I'm at a crossroads: the tool has limitations. So do I bend my campaign to accommodate the limitations of the tool?" In particular, our participants discussed how generative tools they had tried would have results that were difficult for them to work with. For instance, when using the random dungeon map tools on donjon [19], P8 noted,

> "So, you would have donjon as a really great collection of map and name generators, but the random dungeon maps, if you actually use them as they're produced, sometimes it will dump a bunch of kind of unrelated foes and silly trap locations where you're like, 'If an evil wizard did build this dungeon, he would probably have died 40 minutes after he opened it."'

Similarly, P3 stated "The more specific [the output] gets, I find it harder to get ideas. In a way, it kinda blocks my ideas. It has to be somewhat specific and not completely general, but if it's too specific it tends to block ideas, for me at least." P3 goes on to say, "[. . .] a lot of them have— unless you're looking for that specific type of thing— they can feel wrong." P4 details specifically the relationship between a tool's output and the creative needs of the DM and players,

> "The tool should serve the DM and serve the players and their fun. The tool itself shouldn't take center stage in most cases. At least that's my design philosophy with the tools. I look at it and try to assess

> whether or not it's going to constrain the DM's creativity, whether it's going to take the spotlight and attention away from the players, or whether it's going to offer them more opportunity for enjoyment, for play, for that sort of creative problem solving."

This led to many of our participants mentioning that they use more generalized tools such as Wikipedia, Google image search, and Pinterest due to the tools' abilities to inspire through visual or textual information, even though these tools were not designed with GM use in mind.

While too much specificity is problematic, a possibility space that is too general can also be considered a detriment by GMs we interviewed. As stated by P6, "in the past, I might have used a random generator for those things. But I often find that when I start to use a random generator, that it ends up divorced of context." Similarly, P8 mentions, "so with the random stuff, it can be great because, you know, you'll just get some crazy nonsense thing out of it. The downside is that over time, I would find the purely random stuff was hard to fit into a cohesive campaign."

Tool designers sometimes think that the more use cases and scenarios that the tool can be used for, the better the tool. In our interviews, we found the opposite to be true; the constraints of the possibility space are what make the tool useful. P4, who designs their own tools for their campaigns, states,

> "I think it's hard to create something that's system agnostic. All my tools, for example, are very hard to decouple them from the 40k universe and themes: you know, space-horror, gothic-horror in space, really just sci-fi related milieu. It's very, very hard to decouple them because I needed to get that level— at least, I felt I needed to get that level of detail in order to be thematically resonant and useful."

Even the most broadly applicable tools like name and character generators are only useful when constraints are added to the possibility space, such as by constraining names to certain historical contexts or by constraining characters to fit the specifications of a certain TTRPG system. For example, P9 describes their process by saying

> "I will use different name generators for people from different cultures. So, I'll sort of assign, like, people from this region have Dutch names, and I will both look up lists of Dutch names in the real world and use the name generator on that website for the Dutch names— this is just an example— when I'm making NPCs from that area of the world."

Therefore, the goal is to create tools which are general enough to be usable for different GMs, while being specific enough to not feel completely devoid of context. P3 summarizes that a usable tool "has to be somewhat specific and not completely general." A useful tool then, as P7 pointed out, needs to be "specific enough to suggest without being so specific as to dictate."

4.2 Customization of Generative Possibilities

In the previous section, we discussed that generative tools need to find a balance between generalizability and specificity of their output. One way to address this that was mentioned by our participants was to allow customization of the possibility space of the generator. Five of our participants mentioned using tools that allowed customization or customizing the tools themselves. P8 described their frustration with random tavern name generators, "They're oftentimes kind of goofy. It can't really take into account, say, the fact that you've developed this weird little dialect for that part of the world. It can't take into account the words you've created for that." In response, P8 used Excel, which allowed them to customize their options, "I've wound up making my own random name generators using macro-enabled Excel spreadsheets, chunking together the bits of names that felt appropriate for the settings that I would write. The purely random stuff I found basically didn't fit well if I wanted to have smooth narrative flow." P4 also described their use of Excel, "Beyond that I just have a ton of Excel sheets. It's pretty unsexy, but a lot if it is just tables. I roll and if I don't like the result, I just throw it out."

The other GMs we interviewed similarly would use or create their own tools that were more customizable, even if more labor-intensive, so they could produce more meaningful output. P4 explains, "I think it's very, very hard to introduce all these black box closed systems to a DM who then has the choice of using them and not knowing how they work and not being able to modify them in their games because that's gonna constrain how they can build and enact and play in their world." In response to this, P4 creates their own JavaScript tools to fulfill any generation or calculation needs for their campaigns, stating "I've created a bunch of Javascript utilities to automate a lot of the more cumbersome features of the game."

In most cases, GMs were willing to sacrifice some amount of raw speed for better customization and more interesting generation. P1 notes, "I guess the thing to stay away from is making it too rigid. [...] 'Cus it makes it to the point where you can't— there's no customization. It comes to: 'Oh, well that's great, but I want to click this other thing. I prefer this."' Due to the personalized need of each GM that may use such tools, allowing the GM to customize what's in the possibility space can be more effective than providing simple filtering on the results. As P8 states, "The tools that I do still use are mostly things that are organizational or that allow you to tweak the parameters pretty heavily. So for instance, I use Obsidian Portal a lot because you fill in the content and it organizes it in a logical way."

4.3 Ease of Use (Speed, Portability, Online Accessibility)

Ease of use—including speed, portability, and online accessibility—was one of the most commonly mentioned qualities of a useful GM tool. Five of our eight participants specifically mentioned aspects of ease of use as requirements for tool use. For some, such as P9, speed is paramount: "[The tool] must make me better at something, and it must make me faster at something, and I think of the two, faster is more important." Given that GMs often must react to the players on-the-fly, speed plays an important role in keeping the

game feeling dynamic. P4 explains this challenge, "It's doing that and keeping myself in that headspace while also not just letting dead air hang for 10 minutes or not saying, 'Hey, guys. I'll be back in half an hour.' Doing that instantaneously or near-instantaneously is hard." P1 also mentions the tie between ease of use and speed, when describing tools, "If it's: you have to go in and click 17 different buttons and then click this and then go to here and then go to that and then double-check— it becomes too complicated. And then it's: while I'm clicking buttons, I could've written this down and already had a character idea in my head."

Speed was also mentioned frequently by our participants in connection with not having a lot of time to prepare between their jobs and other obligations, so preparation time is usually limited. As P5 explains, "In undergrad, I had a lot more time to just do stuff, and now I don't—or maybe I just have less willingness to stay up late or something like that." P4 also brings up how their needs have changed because of time constraints, "My preparations also have changed a lot, especially as my time has been whittled down more and more and more. It used to be I would write out these long narrative sequences and have backstories for every character. I don't do that anymore." As a result, ideation is quick and iterative, and a useful TTRPG tool must aim to help accelerate the process, or at least not hinder it. As P9 summarizes, "I think DMing, well, because it's so difficult and requires so many skills, takes quite a lot of time. Therefore, if your tool slows me down or even perceives to slow me down, it is going to be quickly and ruthlessly discarded. I have no capacity for something that makes the game a little bit better but takes more time. It has to make something faster."

Portability and online accessibility are also extremely important when GMs consider tools. The GMs we interviewed run campaigns in many different spaces, so a TTRPG-focused tool, especially a physical one, must be easily portable. More commonly, our participants stated that the tools they used are online and digital, as the GMs often ran campaigns with digital tools like laptops or tablets, even if the campaign is in-person. As described by P1, "I don't have a DM screen, but I put a laptop up and I've got a spreadsheet that has literally tabs with names of pubs, names of inns that they can stay in, and names of characters." Similarly, P9 stated, "I will say that tools are much more useful online than offline." They further explain, "Like I prepare for each session by basically writing a document on a computer, and I run with a laptop in front me."

One aspect of online accessibility that was mentioned by only one of our GMs, but we feel is important to highlight, is that of sustainability. P4 describes the issue very well,

> "Probably the first thing that comes to mind that always irritates me is the sustainability of the tool. This happens with any ad-hoc online community. Someone will make this really cool thing and they'll put it on the forums somewhere and they'll have some documentation. For like 6 months they'll respond to questions, and they'll help people use it, and then they'll disappear, go off to college, join the Marines or something. Nobody will ever hear from them again and 4 years later the only place you find this tool— if you're lucky someone has it in a GitHub repo somewhere."

We feel that this is worth highlighting as it is something that we, the authors, have certainly done, and something we see happen within the broader academic community, as well. When creating tools, it's important to plan beyond just the creation of the tool, and to consider our responsibilities to the people and communities which will use those tools as well.

5 FUTURE WORK & LIMITATIONS

We are aware of the limited scope of this initial research, including the small sample size of interview data; as such we aim to conduct further interviews with GMs to provide a more robust understanding of the information gathered. Specifically, the data utilized from this initial round of interviews was primarily from cis, white, male-identifying individuals with a college education or higher, and who are living in the United States or Europe. We therefore plan a set of future interviews to expand this data set to include: trans, nonbinary, and female-identifying individuals, as well as BIPOC, and non-US perspectives.

Expanding our demographic may also allow us to make tools that are more inclusive and culturally sensitive. Some TTRPG systems have past [and sometimes current] issues with cultural appropriation and stereotypes built into the systems [5, 12] which are then embedded into the tools that are made for them. For example, some online name generators rely heavily on names from various cultures that have been mapped to different races within the game system or use digital spreadsheets of names curated from real cultures that influenced the cultural and historical contexts of their in-game societies. We hope to address this need with our further interviews.

Finally, while we created our guidelines specifically considering tool use by GMs of TTRPGs, it is likely that these findings could be further abstracted. For example, the improvisational nature of TTRPGs leads us to hypothesize that there is more to be learned by studying improvisational tools in other media such as theater and music. Additionally, the creative aspects of GMing likely have commonalities with other creative activities, especially those involving storytelling. Further research would therefore be beneficial in gaining even more understanding of designing tools for GMs and other improvisational creatives.

6 CONCLUSION

In this research, we interviewed eight experienced tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) game masters (GMs) to gain understanding of their existing practices of content creation for their game sessions, particularly around the tools they used and challenges they faced. We used qualitative analysis to identify three generalized design guidelines for creating generative tools for GMs: 1. provide inspiration, not answers; 2. allow for customization of the generative possibilities; 3. prioritize ease of use (speed, portability, and online accessibility) in the design. These three themes were mentioned by the majority of the GMs we interviewed, and captures the challenges, frustrations, and opportunities GMs gave us around the tools they do (and don't) find useful.

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A INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Below is the list of questions we worked from during our semi-structured interviews.

A.1 Background

- How much experience do you have playing TTRPGs?
- How much experience do you have DMing?
- How often and how long do you play TTRPGs (as a player or DM)?
- In your view, what's the core experience of TTRPGs?
- What's the "best" part?

A.2 Preparation

- How much time do you spend outside of your sessions preparing for the next session?
- What part takes the longest time?
- What part is the hardest?
- What current resources do you use for inspiration when generating story, characters, etc.?
- During a play session, how much do you create on the fly?
- What are the difficulties of doing so?
- What would an ideal tool look like? How would it work?

A.3 Tarot-Based Tool

- How much do you know about tarot?
- -Explain our system: a tarot-based generation tool-
- What challenges would you see with this type of system?
- What opportunities (if any)?
- What aspects of tarot do you think might be interesting or useful for players?