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Tabletop Roleplaying Games

Taylor Skelton Smith- The University of Alabama

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## **A Dickey Situation: A Study of How Controlled Vocabularies Describe Tabletop Roleplaying Games**

Taylor Skelton Smith

*University Libraries, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, United States of America*

tssmith13@ua.edu

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1966-6457>

Taylor Skelton Smith is a metadata librarian at The University of Alabama and received his MSLIS from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

## **A Dickey Situation: A Study of How Controlled Vocabularies Describe Tabletop Roleplaying Games**

As popular culture has become an accepted aspect of study, academic interest has increased for tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs). However, existing controlled vocabularies cannot accurately describe them, and this will decrease their discoverability in collections. This article surveys several controlled vocabularies that feature headings for TTRPGs and argues that their definitions, structures, and disambiguation between subject and genre/form fail to distinguish TTRPGs from other forms of roleplay or from works about TTRPGs. The author also offers possible short and long-term solutions for better implementing existing vocabularies in TTRPG records.

Keywords: controlled vocabularies; roleplaying games; subject analysis; genre/form terms

### **INTRODUCTION**

Controlled vocabularies are “lists of terms [...] in which all terms or phrases representing a concept are brought together.”<sup>1</sup> In the library field, subject and other headings systems use this concept to create access points, standardized entries that can be used to describe works. For example, the cougar is known by many other names, such as puma, mountain lion, panther, and catamount. A controlled vocabulary could set the access point to be “puma,” removing from researchers the need to make separate queries for *puma*, *mountain lion*, and *panther* when looking for materials concerning the animal. Implementing a controlled vocabulary can help a library standardize the language in its catalog to facilitate discovery for its users.

Though all controlled vocabularies seek to organize information into access points, they differ in application and purpose. Some vocabularies specialize in a specific field like Medical Subject headings (MeSH), while the Thesaurus of Graphic Materials (TGM) covers both subjects and formats related to visual materials. Choosing a vocabulary that matches the specialization of the covered collection can greatly increase its discoverability in a catalog, but attempting to

apply headings from an irrelevant vocabulary can interfere with users rather than help.

Moreover, appropriate controlled vocabularies can have insufficient headings. Without proper definition or structure, these access points meant to describe one given concept can misrepresent it or group it with other distinct ideas. Even actively maintained controlled vocabularies can contain terms that confuse catalogers and mislead users.

Tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) are one such example. TTRPGs were created in the 1970s, inspired by and branching out from tactical tabletop wargames. The first major example of a TTRPG was *Dungeons & Dragons*. Though it has gone through several different editions and iterations, it remains the most popular TTRPG to this day. That is not to say that it is the only game available; today there are thousands of games to play and study, from independently produced zine format games to games based on existing properties produced by specialized TTRPG publishers. After a rise and decline in the 1980's, TTRPGs are now more popular than ever, played and published by people all around the world.<sup>2</sup> This paper will refer to the definition from Cason Snow's article "Dragons in the stacks: an introduction to role-playing games and their value to libraries," which defines TTRPGs as

"a set of rules of varying complexity where a group of people (the players) assume roles (characters, the protagonists) and cooperatively seek to overcome obstacles and resolve conflicts placed before them by the game master (the GM). The action in the game is narrated by both the players (for their characters) and the GM (for all other inhabitants) for the purpose of collaboratively crafting a kind of ongoing narrative."<sup>3</sup>

Though not without its flaws, this definition distinguishes TTRPGs from boardgames and computer roleplaying games (CRPGs). The creation of a narrative, the aspect of roleplay, is intrinsic to TTRPGs and distinguishes it from boardgames such as *Monopoly* or tactical wargames like *BattleTech* from which they evolved. The reliance on human players to decide

and arbitrate actions separates it from CRPGs like the *Elder Scrolls* or *Final Fantasy* series of videogames.

More than just a game in text form, TTRPGs are deceptively unique in their content and form. The content of a TTRPG book is a unique combination of instruction manual and worldbuilding document designed to be read and referenced differently from other formats of fiction. Though they can look like ordinary texts, they are often closer to rules documents for a sport combined with stage direction for a play. Further, the form of TTRPGs is more varied than typical materials. They often consist of only a book, but it is not uncommon for TTRPGs to package together text, miniature pieces, maps, and unique dice. Whether they are packaged as a book or bundle of realia, TTRPGs are unlike typical works of fiction or nonfiction.

For academic libraries, these distinctions and nuances have not historically been important. Seen as an artifact of popular culture, academic libraries did not intentionally collect TTRPGs. As the scholarly study of popular culture gained traction, a number of disciplines have taken an interest in the form, from history and literature to economics and sociology.<sup>4</sup> All of these fields, as any academic discipline, require access to primary sources to conduct scholarship. In this case, the primary source would be TTRPG books. Though academic libraries have been historically resistant, this demand has been slowly but surely reflected in library holdings. TTRPGs as part of the larger category of tabletop games have been gaining shelf space. Robson, Phillips, and Guerrero begin their 2017 article detailing practices for circulating tabletop games by noting that the subject is necessitated by an increase in such collections across all types of libraries.<sup>5</sup> In Slobuski, Robson, and Bentley's survey of the same year on tabletop games in libraries, academic libraries made up 28% of participants gathered through snowball sampling.<sup>6</sup> Compare this to a 2009 survey by Nicholson on gaming programs in libraries. Of the

313 respondents, academic libraries constituted only 9%.<sup>7</sup> Whether they are part of outreach or retention programming or serving as reference and curriculum material, TTRPGs are slowly but surely on the rise in libraries. Now that TTRPGs are considered a valid resource for study, it is important for academic libraries to properly describe them for better discoverability. However, the controlled vocabularies they use often cannot distinguish between TTRPGs and other types of games such as CRPGs. Moreso, TTRPGs are often given the same headings as materials about TTRPGs. Grouped with everything from video games to novels that include TTRPGs as a plot element and books about fantasy football, TTRPGs themselves become difficult to locate in the catalog. If patrons searching through library catalogs could not distinguish or separate *Pride and Prejudice* from literary criticism about it or its film adaptations, research efforts would suffer. This situation is currently the reality for TTRPGs.

Facilitating resource discovery is one of the core tenets of libraries, and controlled vocabularies have the ability to help or hinder this vital function. The purpose of this paper is to establish that existing headings in controlled vocabularies do not sufficiently describe TTRPGs, stemming from a combination of vague definitions, unhelpful hierarchical structures, and a failure to disambiguate between subject and genre/form. Headings from several controlled vocabularies will be analyzed by these criteria, and possible solutions will be offered.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

While controlled vocabularies receive attention from cataloging and metadata librarians, the majority of users do not employ them in their searching. Google-style keyword searching eschews the use of subject or form headings. In fact, the moments when much of the public encounters the idea of subject headings at all is when the media covers the fact that major controlled vocabularies like Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) are shown to

including biased language for marginalized peoples. Many people did not even know that the Library of Congress had a controlled vocabulary until the coverage on the “Illegal aliens” heading.<sup>8</sup> Considering these factors, the question has come up if controlled vocabularies are necessary or relevant in modern library use.

Though users may be unaware of them, controlled vocabularies are useful, even for keyword-style searches. A 2015 study by Gross, Taylor, and Joudrey researched the role that controlled vocabularies, particularly LCSH headings, played in keyword-style searches. They found that without the application of these vocabularies, 27% of all results would be lost.<sup>9</sup> This percentage is somewhat lower than a 2005 survey of the same nature which reported 35% of results lost. They theorize that the increasing inclusion of tables of contents, summaries, and other automated enhancements accounts for the difference between the two studies. The new fields have filled in some of the discovery gaps previously only handled by subject headings.<sup>10</sup> While the inclusion of these elements slightly decreased the efficacy of the LCSH headings, the seven percent difference is far from the total redundancy that was predicted by Calhoun after the 2005 study.<sup>11</sup> Though these studies were focused on subject headings, genre and form terms also aid discovery when indexed. Controlled vocabularies can also increase discoverability in physical collections. A 2023 paper by Walker details the process of adding indexed genre and form headings to the C. S. Lewis Library at Wheaton College. As a result, the terms are able to be searched and used as a filter for users, and librarians have reported being able to easily answer complicated questions such as which materials contain Lewis’s annotations.<sup>12</sup> While users might not realize it, controlled vocabularies are still important to their searching strategies.

Controlled vocabularies are also important for researchers searching for specialized materials. Bartol examined the effectiveness of searching for agriculture materials in databases

that did not specialize in the field. Across these non-specialized databases, he found that he was able to increase the number of results by an average of 39.2% by using the database's controlled vocabulary. Even though these databases varied widely in their structure and focus, including controlled vocabulary terms in the search increased the number of relevant results in every instance. Proper subject analysis can help users discover specialized subjects regardless of the specialization of the collection.<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, controlled vocabularies that fail to properly describe subjects can impede discovery. In "Falling through the Cracks: Metadata Inadequacies in Rock Climbing Research," Casucci and Wittmann explain how LCSH does not include sufficient headings for describing climbing sports to the extent useful for users. Factors of climbing difficulty class are not included, and terms for the full range climbing activities are not present or misrepresented. LCSH's lack of correct vocabulary combined with librarians being unfamiliar with the field results in over half of scholarship focusing on climbing sports being misrepresented by its subject headings. As the article shows, inaccuracies in controlled vocabularies lead to inaccurate subject analysis, which can severely reduce discoverability.<sup>14</sup> Discoverability impeded by inaccurate subjects appears to be a pattern with material not traditionally covered by academic pursuit. In their 2020 article, Falk and Lewis discuss methods and challenges for cataloging popular music with Resource Description and Access, but their section on subject is fairly straightforward.<sup>15</sup> They note that many catalogers include genre information in both subject and genre/form fields but anticipate only the genre/form field being used in the future. They compare this to Simpkins' 2001 article on cataloging popular music which describes music genre in content of work fields as there were no widely used controlled vocabularies that included sufficient terms for music genre.<sup>16</sup> During the nineteen years between the two articles, academic



interest in popular music has significantly increased, and Library of Congress Genre/Form Terms (LCGFT) now provides a wide selection of genre terms for the field.

TTRPGs are currently experiencing a similar situation. Though traditionally excluded from academic libraries, recent years have seen TTRPGs receiving more scholarly attention. A 2014 survey conducted by Wolper interviewed a number of special collections librarians to discuss why TTRPGs were underrepresented and what academic value they offered. Several interviewees referenced “academic snobbery” as a significant factor for the exclusion. TTRPGs, along with many other forms of popular culture, have historically been ignored by academic libraries. The survey confirmed that as popular culture became a more acceptable subject of study, popular culture materials, TTRPGs specifically, have seen significantly increased circulation. Interviewees mention literary, media, gender, and communications studies as taking an interest in TTRPGs. Beyond the history of physical culture, these materials are serving as a resource across academic disciplines.<sup>17</sup>

TTRPGs are studied by a variety of disciplines but also have their own field, that of game studies. Branching out of media studies, game studies includes TTRPGs in its larger mission to understand games and how people interact with them. TTRPGs are a major component of *Role-playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, the first textbook to focus on roleplaying games.<sup>18</sup> The text has a section for TTRPGs, describing their unique history and form. Beyond the study of TTRPGs themselves, the book chronicles how they interact with the fields of education, economics, sociology, and psychology. TTRPGs also feature as the subject of academic journals such as *Analog Game Studies*<sup>19</sup> as well as essay collections like the upcoming *Essays on Indie Tabletop Roleplaying Games*,<sup>20</sup> part of McFarland’s *Studies in Gaming* series.<sup>21</sup>

Though TTRPGs possess academic merit in their own field of game studies as well as interdisciplinary studies, they are often not described effectively or consistently in catalogs. Very little scholarship covers TTRPGs as objects in the catalog. Torres-Roman and Snow's 2015 book *Dragons in the Stacks: A Teen Librarian's Guide to Tabletop Role-Playing* briefly touches upon cataloging and subject analysis. In it, they note that all TTRPGs are classified as "Fantasy games" in LCSH but add that the genre of fantasy does not apply to TTRPGs. They briefly mention that subheadings can be applied per local policy but add that no specific subheadings exist for TTRPGs. Finally, they mention that "Fantasy games" has a large number of narrower terms, and that the names of these headings are inconsistent and vague, leading to possible confusion for users searching for specific games.<sup>22</sup> This book was the only discoverable material which focused on catalog description of TTRPGs, and it devoted less than two pages to the topic.

While there is very little material on the cataloging of roleplaying games, there is some library scholarship on their form. In their 2015 article, Schneider and Hutchison assess common difficulties libraries have involving collecting and cataloging TTRPGs. The article contains an argument that TTRPGs and their supplements should be treated as reference materials. They argue that TTRPG books are more like reference books than standard fiction books in both form and function. TTRPGs bear more resemblance to sports rulebooks in that they are not meant to be read for pleasure but to be referenced as a source of information during the playing of the game. Though it is not the focus of the overall article, it recognizes that TTRPGs' unique structure and form should be considered in description practices.<sup>23</sup>

Widening the scope from TTRPGs to tabletop games in general, "Enhancing the Discovery of Tabletop Games" discusses how to better catalog tabletop games of all types to be more visible and accessible for their users. Robson et al. assert that in addition to considerations

such as including the number of players, duration of play, and intended audience in both MARC records and facets of the library's front-end display, current controlled vocabularies could not precisely describe their collection. As part of their larger effort, they discuss the use of genre terms in the collection. They mention that there has been some scholarship pertaining to the description of tabletop games as three-dimensional objects, but librarians often have to resort to local practices to meet user needs for discovery.<sup>24</sup> Once their library began to expand its tabletop game collection, Robson et al. concluded that current controlled vocabularies lacked sufficient granularity to properly categorize the breadth of tabletop gaming.<sup>25</sup>

Despite TTRPGs gaining relevance in scholarship and some amount of increased representation in collections, they still have very little in the way of established policies and best practices. Given their unique form and specificity, TTRPGs require accurate and consistent to be properly described and discoverable.

## **DEFICIENT DEFINITIONS**

Constructing a helpful definition for TTRPGs is a difficult task as TTRPGs are resistant to blanket statements. They are often associated with the use of dice as a randomizing element to determine the direction of the story, with fantasy settings, and with one 'game master' in control of the world and setting positioned opposite two or more players controlling individual characters who act as the game's protagonists. These assumptions are true for many games, but far from all. There are games that use Jenga-style towers in place of dice (*Dread*<sup>26</sup>), emulate settings like regency era dramas and Spanish soap operas (*Good Society*<sup>27</sup> and *Pasión de la Pasiones*<sup>28</sup>), have world and setting management distributed through the player group with no individual serving as a game master (*Fall of Magic*<sup>29</sup>), or even played by a single person (*Thousand Year Old Vampire*<sup>30</sup>). For every convention that can be drawn from looking at a

sample of TTRPGs, games exist that break it. Even the definition listed in the introduction is imperfect, assuming the need of a game master when many TTRPGs completely bypass the role.

Without proper headings that reflect their form and content, users will not be able to effectively find these unique and varied games. The first problem with existing controlled vocabularies is that they do not possess accurate or exclusive definitions for TTRPGs. To properly define TTRPGs, a heading needs to allow for all the aforementioned variations they can have while differentiating them from similar but distinct forms of roleplay. Scope notes are the most obvious element of the definition, “a statement defining and/or delimiting the meaning and associative relations of a subject heading, index term, or a classification notation.”<sup>31</sup> While scope notes are the section of the heading most directly tied to establishing definition, the nuance of the definition is also affected by variant terms and the application scale of the vocabulary itself. Variant terms are supposed to act as synonyms or alternative access point names, but they can often color the intended purpose of a heading. Likewise, definitions can change based on the context granted by the nature of the controlled vocabulary’s intended application.

The difficulty involved in creating a solid definition for TTRPGs also reflects why it is important to have one. TTRPGs, despite their growing popularity and academic importance, are still often misunderstood. Tabletop roleplaying games, CRPGs, and live action roleplaying games (larps) share many of the same themes and ideas but differ in the forms they take, the tools necessary to participate in them, and the mechanics by which they operate. Though they contain similar elements, these games are significantly different in their execution and form. Deterding and Zagal dedicate different chapters to each in their textbook, distinguishing each as unique forms of roleplaying.<sup>32</sup> The ideal heading for TTRPGs allows for all the variations inherent to the form while distinguishing it from these other forms of roleplay.

The first subject of this study is the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). Initially published in 1898, the LCSH is currently on its forty-fourth edition. Committees discuss the introduction of new headings and revisions to existing ones at monthly Subject Editorial meetings. Despite this, the Library of Congress has a reputation for enacting these changes quite slowly. Regardless of these shortcomings, LCSH is the most popular choice of controlled vocabulary for academic libraries.<sup>33</sup> The LCSH heading used to represent tabletop roleplaying games is “Fantasy games.” Added in 1986, “Fantasy games” contains no scope notes. Its listed variant terms are “Fantasy role playing games” and “Role-playing games”. The latter was added to the heading by the Subject Editorials Committee in 2015.<sup>34</sup> These variant terms are the only element of definition that present ideas of scope. The term *fantasy* is typically thought of as a genre or setting element. Without the inclusion of these variant terms, no link to roleplaying games could be found in the heading’s definitions.

Further, the use of *fantasy* in the heading name introduces the potential for confusion and misinterpretation. The term “Fantasy games” contains a false connotation in the word *fantasy*. The most direct tie to the term in LCSH is to “Fantasy fiction.”<sup>35</sup> Though “Fantasy fiction” does not have scope notes either, the existence of other headings such as “Science fiction”<sup>36</sup> and “Horror tales”<sup>37</sup> imply that it is supposed to describe fiction that follows generally fantastical tropes and is not an umbrella term for all genre fiction. The game that most people associate with TTRPGs is *Dungeons & Dragons*, a game whose official settings are all some variation on fantasy. However, the name “Fantasy games” artificially restricts TTRPGs to the fantasy genre. There are many games which can be classified as fantasy, but there also exist games in every other setting and flavor. Every type of science fiction, horror, mystery, historical fiction, romance, and drama are represented in TTRPGs. Labeling every one of them as a fantasy game

is fundamentally inaccurate. In their monograph, Snow and Torres-Roman make note that the term does not reflect the variety of genres available in TTRPGs.<sup>38</sup> This is ultimately an easily solvable problem. Changing the term “Fantasy games” to something more accurate and inclusive would solve the issue of portraying all TTRPGs as the equivalent to fantasy fiction.

Getty’s Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) shares a similar problem with its heading “Role-playing game.”<sup>39</sup> First established in the late 1970s, the AAT is a faceted vocabulary that seeks to describe art and material culture. The entry also lacks any sort of scope note. Though it uses a more straightforward and neutral term of “Role-playing game,” there are no other clues to indicate a more specific application of the heading. The only other equivalent term is “jeu de rôle,” the French term for roleplaying games.

Wikidata, an open data Wikimedia project first started in 2012<sup>40</sup>, describes the subject of “tabletop role-playing game” with the scope note of “form of role-playing game for leisure.”<sup>41</sup> The entry also lists several variant terms of “pen-and-paper role-playing game,” “TRPG,” and “TTRPG.” Spanish and Chinese terms, scope notes, and variants are also provided. This note might at first seem scant, as the only specificity it provides is distinguishing that it is for leisure. This distinction is helpful, though, in determining that these games are not for purely educational or training purposes. Though they are less frequently referred to as games, roleplay is used frequently in the fields of business and education to teach those involved processes or concepts.<sup>42</sup> Roleplaying exercises like these are another form of roleplaying that is distinct from TTRPGs which should be viewed more as entertainment and art.

Beyond the scope note, the title and variant terms further contribute to the understanding of the heading. “Tabletop role-playing game” and “pen-and-paper role-playing game” both work

as limiters to establish the application of the heading. These terms distinguish the heading as being specifically for TTRPGs, separating it from CRPGs and larps.

CRPGs are videogames that use many of the ideas and mechanic first implemented by TTRPGs. These games can accommodate play by one person, such as *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* or many people playing concurrently like *World of Warcraft*. They use ideas and structures pioneered by TTRPGs, but detailed mechanics and the behavior of the world are handled by the software of the game as opposed to the players themselves.

Larp can broadly be defined as a game that “embodies role-based interactions and physically performed role-play,”<sup>43</sup> where players are physically acting as characters and often moving about a larger space to interact with each other and the environment. As a result, game mechanics reliant on tools such as dice are substituted with other methods or in many cases bypassed altogether. However, there are still other examples which buck that trend. Where exactly tabletop ends and larp begins is another example of how difficult roleplaying games can be to define.

The mechanics of CRPGs are handled by the internal workings of the software, and larps allow and often expect players to be navigating a physical environment. In contrast, games like *Dungeons & Dragons* often take place around a central visual aid, and play is resolved through analog means. For these reasons, these roleplaying games are specified with names like tabletop and pen-and-paper. Wikidata’s entry for TTRPGs is the only heading so far to differentiate TTRPGs from CRPGs and larps. While its scope note does not make this specific distinction, the title and variant terms set an application exclusive to TTRPGs. With no scope notes and no specification through their variant terms, LCSH and AAT cannot make necessary distinctions between these forms of roleplay.

So far, all of the vocabularies surveyed have been quite broad in their scale. LCSH and Wikidata have no restriction on their application. AAT covers a breadth of material and forms under the umbrella of art and material culture. In contrast, the Genre Terms for Tabletop Games (GTTG), developed by Robson, Yanowski, and Sassen at the University of North Texas Libraries, was developed alongside improvements in their local catalog's faceting and metadata practices to describe their tabletop games collection. One of fifty headings, "Roleplaying games" uses the note of "a game in which participants adopt the roles of imaginary characters in an adventure under the direction of a Game Master," citing dictionary.com. The entry has one variant of "RPG."<sup>44</sup>

GTTG's entry is the first heading with a scope note that attempts to distinguish its form. The mention of a game master in the definition removes CRPGs from its application, as the software of the games take the roles of the position. Larps, on the other hand, can and do implement game masters, so the definition does not exclude them. That work is taken care of by the name of the controlled vocabulary itself. Though the scope note leaves room to include larps, the name Genre Terms for Tabletop Games by its intended application excludes them as well as CRPGs. In this case, the definition is redundant in its purpose of narrowing its application. In fact, this scope note narrows the scope to the extent that it excludes legitimate TTRPGs. As the literal interpretation of the note demands a game master as requisite to qualify as a TTRPG, it excludes any game that do not have one. As is, the note only hinders the purpose and scope set by the controlled vocabulary and heading names.

Finally, the Library of Congress Genre and Form Terms (LCGFT) was first published in 2007. LCGFT added the heading "Role-playing Games" in 2020.<sup>45</sup> The term includes a scope note which reads "Games in which players assume the roles of imaginary characters who engage



in adventures in a fictional setting” and lists “Roleplaying games” and “RPGs (Role-playing games)” as variants.<sup>46</sup> Though LCGFT’s heading contains a scope note, it does not draw any distinctions between TTRPGs and other forms of roleplay. The same definition could accurately describe a heading for larps or CRPGs. Unlike GTTG and Wikidata which have similarly vague definitions, the name of LCGFT’s heading does nothing to assist in establishing what forms of roleplay it is intended to cover. The first source used for defining the heading “Role-playing Games” is from *Wasteland 2*, a 2019 CRPG.<sup>47</sup> Including a CRPG as a source for the heading further confuses whether this heading is meant to apply to CRPGs or not.

Table I, a comparison of controlled vocabulary by definition

Controlled Vocabulary	Scope Note	Application	Variant Terms
LCSH	N/A	Universal	- Fantasy role playing games - Role-playing games
AAT	N/A	Art objects and their subjects	- jeu de rôle
Wikidata	form of role-playing game for leisure	Universal	- pen-and-paper role-playing game - TRPG - TTRPG
GTTG	Game in which participants adopt the roles of imaginary characters in an adventure under the direction of a Game Master	Tabletop games	- RPG
LCGFT	Games in which players assume the roles of imaginary characters who engage in adventures in a fictional setting.	Genre and form	- Roleplaying games - RPGs (Role-playing games)

## SUBPAR STRUCTURES

As heading names and definitions can explicitly state purpose and application, a controlled vocabulary's structure can implicitly lend context and clues about usage to terms. While LCSH is not strictly hierarchical, it does contain some hierarchical elements. LCSH's heading lacks any sort of definition, but "Fantasy games" is nested within a structure that lends context. "Fantasy games" has two broader terms, "Role playing" and "Games." "Games" has variants of "Past-times" and "Recreations," and its application seems to cover leisure activities with some sort of rules set. "Role playing" as a heading is broader, concerning psychological and sociological aspects of the act itself and including "Fantasy games," "Cosplay," and "Role reversal" as its narrower terms.

The narrower terms, on the other hand, present a less straightforward approach. "Fantasy games" contains 137 narrower terms. Of these narrower terms, "Fantasy sports" stands out as the only subheading covering any sort of broad category. The other 136 subheadings are all for specific game titles and properties. The selection of subheadings covers a wide range of forms, from TTRPGs such as "Shadowrun"<sup>48</sup> to wargames like "Warhammer 40,000"<sup>49</sup> and CRPGs such as "World of Warcraft"<sup>50</sup>. Also among the narrower terms are choose-your-own-adventure books such as "Scorpion Swamp"<sup>51</sup> and several ambiguous properties. "Ravenloft (game)"<sup>52</sup> could refer to the notable setting produced for the TTRPG *Dungeons & Dragons*, or it could refer to one of the several computer roleplaying games based on the property such as *Ravenloft: Strahd's Possession*<sup>53</sup> and *Ravenloft: Stone Prophet*.<sup>54</sup>

These 136 title-based narrower terms should be able to determine what falls under the purview of "Fantasy games." As narrower terms, the subject of each of these subheadings should

also have all the properties of a “Fantasy game.” Titles included by these narrower terms include tabletop roleplaying games like “Paranoia,”<sup>55</sup> boardgames like “Munchkin,”<sup>56</sup> trading card games like “Netrunner,”<sup>57</sup> wargames like “Kobolds & Cobblestones,”<sup>58</sup> videogames like “Dwarf Fortress,”<sup>59</sup> and choose-your-own-adventure books with “Fantasy sports”<sup>60</sup> as the single non-title narrower term.

Some of the represented subheadings do follow the application suggested by the definition of “Fantasy games.” *World of Warcraft*<sup>61</sup> is a CRPG. While not helpful in distinguishing TTRPGs, the inclusion of *World of Warcraft* as a form of roleplay is logically sound. On the other hand, a substantial number of entries on this list that have no real element of roleplaying. *Magic: The Gathering*<sup>62</sup> is a trading card game that has a premise steeped in fantasy, but at no point do players take on any sort of character while playing. *Warhammer 40,000*,<sup>63</sup> while it has spin-off TTRPGs, is itself a miniature-based wargame with no roleplay element. Additionally, wargames have a distinct subject heading not associated with “Fantasy games.” *Apex Legends*<sup>64</sup> is a first person shooter videogame with no tangible links to roleplaying. While “Fantasy games” has variant terms that seem to broadly establish some sort of scale of application, the narrower terms defy these expectations.

In addition to their relevance to roleplaying games, the narrower terms also follow no discernable pattern in their coverage. Snow and Roman-Torres make note of this, stating that the heading “Werewolf (Game)” could refer to the games *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* or *Werewolf: The Forsaken*,<sup>65</sup> but the problem goes beyond ambiguity. Some of the narrower terms cover entire franchises such as *Cyberpunk*,<sup>66</sup> which spans decades and a half-dozen editions which themselves constitute unique games. Other subheadings cover individual games such as *Amber Diceless Role-Playing*.<sup>67</sup> There are even instances where larger properties and the individual

games that make them up exist side by side. *World of Darkness*<sup>68</sup> is the larger franchise in which games like *Mummy: The Resurrection*<sup>69</sup> take place, and both are listed as narrower terms of “Fantasy games” with no link between them. Not only does the structure surrounding “Fantasy games” stray from the expectations set by its variant terms, but the directions it goes are generally inconsistent and unhelpful for discoverability.

Unlike LCSH, AAT’s structure is hierarchical. “Role-playing game” has no narrower terms to either obscure its intended application or lend additional context. The broader terms, however, infer the application meant for the heading. “Role-playing game” is under the heading of “Game equipment.” The top-level heading that “Role-playing game” belongs to is “Furnishings and equipment,” which belongs to the object facet. True to its focus on material culture, the hierarchy that the heading belongs to specifies its idea as a physical object. The broader category of “Game equipment” connotes an idea of artifact. Though there is no definition to compare against, this designation feels closer to the idea of the TTRPG as a boxed game, like a traditional boardgame, than it does TTRPG as a book of rules. These boxed set formats are not uncommon, but they are less common than the standalone text. This hierarchy is completely separate from the “Visual and Verbal Communication” where books are categorized. Without an explicit scope note or scale of application, it is difficult to discern whether this choice is intentional or not. Including TTRPGs in both hierarchies would be difficult the way this vocabulary is structured.

Wikidata’s structure does not rely only on hierarchies but allows for more detailed relationships. “Tabletop role-playing game” is defined as a subclass of the headings “role-playing game,” “tabletop game,” and “publication.” It is also described as an instance of “game genre” and has two images linked to the heading, both of which depict people gathered around a

table playing a TTRPG. These statements are all accurate and fit the purpose of the heading. The heading is also listed as different from “role-playing (behavior).” The heading’s first notable misstep is that it lists TTRPGs as having a minimum number of players of two. As established earlier, many TTRPGs can be played by a single person. This might be because the heading links to *Dungeons & Dragons* as its model item. Though even *Dungeons & Dragons* can be played by one player, the popular conception of the game is played by a group. This misstep reinforces that TTRPGs cover a wide variety of experiences, and even the most popular example does not provide a monolithic example of the form. Though this is a small oversight, it proves a point that more complicated structures can leave more room for errors to occur.

The more nuanced relationships between headings also mean that it can be difficult to track them. Though “tabletop role-playing game” is a subclass of “role-playing game,” it is only listed on the page of the former. If a user looked up “role-playing game,” the only way they would find the heading for specifically TTRPGs would be to make another separate search for them. This is not a problem specific to either heading but one inherent to the scale at which Wikidata works. The heading “fish” cannot list every species of fish as subclasses, and this applies to roleplaying games as well. Even so, it makes understanding and navigating Wikidata’s structure more difficult than the other vocabularies surveyed so far.

On the other side of the spectrum, GTTG’s structure is minimalist. “Roleplaying games” has no narrower terms or related terms. Other headings in the vocabulary do list related terms. “Card drafting games” lists “Card games” as related. Though it is not mentioned in the document of the controlled vocabulary, Robson et al. mention in the accompanying paper that the heading “Tabletop games” is the broadest term in the vocabulary, and everything in the collection is

assigned the heading.<sup>70</sup> This, along with the intended application, would imply that “Tabletop games” is a broader term for “Roleplaying games.”

Finally, LCGFT takes the same approach as LCSH, containing hierarchical relationships of broader and narrower terms but not connecting every heading to a single hierarchical system. It lists “Puzzles and games” as a broader term and no narrower terms. Because it has no narrower terms, LCGFT avoids the problems of inconsistency that hamper LCSH. Additionally, LCGFT added the heading of “Video games” in August of 2023. While an improvement, the definitions of “Video games” and “Role-playing games” do not quite allow for structural differentiation between TTRPGs and CRPGs. The given scope of “Role-playing games” still allows for CRPGs to fit within the scope. As a result, a cataloguer could accurately describe a videogame with roleplaying elements like *Baldur’s Gate 3*<sup>71</sup> with both headings. While helpful for such cases, it also means that LCGFT still cannot effectively distinguish between forms of roleplay. At first glance, LCGFT seems to be an ideal solution. The explicit scope note combined with the vocabulary’s genre and form focus make this an immediate choice for describing TTRPGs. However, the definition is not quite as specific as it should be, as people playing computer roleplaying games also assume roles in a fictional setting.

Table II, a comparison of controlled vocabulary by structure

Controlled Vocabulary	Structure	Narrower Terms	Broader Terms
LCSH	Hierarchical traits	137 terms (fantasy sports and 136 game titles)	- Games - Role Playing
AAT	Hierarchical	None	Game Equipment
Wikidata	Linked data	- Game - Genre	- role-playing game - tabletop game - publication
GTTG	Minimal	None	Tabletop games
LCGFT	Hierarchical traits	None	Puzzles and games

## DISASTROUS DISAMBIGUATIONS

Definitions can establish intended purpose and scale of application. The structures that these headings exist within can lend context and affect how users understand them. However, neither of these factors can totally encompass what a vocabulary heading effectively covers.

Subject headings are meant to describe the subject matter of the material it is assigned to.<sup>72</sup> To use an example outside of games, consider cataloging a Blu-ray copy of the 2016 movie *Arrival*. Applying the LC subject heading “Science fiction” would be considered incorrect because its subject matter is not science fiction. The movie is not about science fiction; it *is* science fiction. That is its genre, not its subject. So too is *Dungeons & Dragons, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition* not about roleplaying games. It is a game. A controlled vocabulary heading that describes the subject (the aboutness of an item) cannot be accurately assigned to a form. A subject heading about TTRPGs could be assigned to scholarship discussing the games but not the games themselves. In order to accurately reflect their materials, controlled vocabularies need to be able to disambiguate headings that describe subject and headings that describe genre and form. Assigning both subject and genre/form headings is normally a strategy to increase discoverability, and this approach is sometimes applied to TTRPGs. However, attributing such material with TTRPG terminology in both subject and genre/form headings is incorrect and can muddy its description, as the subject heading groups it with material about TTRPGs at the same time that the genre/form heading groups it with games.

LCSH, a controlled vocabulary inherently focused on subject headings, might seem at first to be disqualified. Though describing subjects are its intended use, it is not incapable of describing form or genre. Library of Congress has also created form subdivisions. These subdivisions are used alongside existing LCSH headings to add more precision, such as

specifying the time period or geographic region to which the subject is applicable. Form subdivisions are designed to specify the form the item of the subject takes. An immediate example would be the subdivision of “fiction”, the use of which the Library of Congress instructs in the subject heading manual regarding fiction.<sup>73</sup> However, TTRPGs resist this solution. The manual uses the example of “Gardens” with the subdivision “Fiction” to describe a work titled *Garden tales: classic stories from favorite writers*.<sup>74</sup> This usage works because the gardens are still a subject of the work, but TTRPGs are not the subject of TTRPG. The “fiction” subdivision cannot overcome that TTRPG is a form, and not a subject. “Fantasy games” with subdivision “fiction” would only be applicable for works of fiction about fantasy games such as *The Cleveland Heights LGBTQ Sci-fi and Fantasy Role Playing Club*.<sup>75</sup>

“Fiction” is not the only available LCSH form subdivision, though. Other subdivisions have a precedent for applying to TTRPGs. Torres-Roman and Snow mention “Fantasy games” as the de facto heading for describing TTRPGs during their brief overview of cataloging TTRPGs, suggesting using the form subdivisions “Rules” or “Handbooks, manuals, etc.” based on local policy.<sup>76</sup> The Library of Congress’s subject headings files also list “Rules” as a suggested subdivision for “Fantasy games.”<sup>77</sup>

On the surface, adding either of the “Rules” or “Handbooks” subdivisions seem like a straightforward solution. “Rules” is used “under names of individual religious and monastic orders, individual contests and sports events and under types of games and activities for works containing rules of those organizations or pertaining to those topics.”<sup>78</sup> “Handbooks, Manuals, etc.” should be used “as a form subdivision under names of individual religious and monastic orders, individual contests and sports events and under types of games and activities for works containing rules of those organizations or pertaining to those topics.”<sup>79</sup> These subdivisions seem



to be acceptable applications and ameliorate the problems LCSH normally has with addressing genre/form as a subject-based vocabulary.

On closer inspection, though, the wording of these headings describes items that are not quite TTRPGs themselves. “Handbooks, manuals, etc.” lists that it is used to describe reference materials. More specifically, the definition of “Handbooks” is supposed to describe handbooks for individual games, not games in general. Thus, “Fantasy games” with the subdivision “Handbooks, manuals, etc.” cannot accurately describe any individual game. In the context of TTRPGs, the subdivision as written would most accurately describe items that have condensed rules or setting information to be referred to during play. Examples of this are often referred to as rules “cheat sheets” such as the one linked here for the game *Blades in the Dark*.<sup>80</sup> It could also possibly refer to resources like a System Reference Document (SRD), a site containing hyperlinked pages for individual rules and systems but not setting information or context such as this one produced for *Pathfinder, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition*.<sup>81</sup>

The “Rules” subdivision is more straightforward and closer to describing what TTRPGs do, which is describe how a game works. Even so, the rules subdivision is not describing an object or activity itself but rules pertaining to the activity. Even if the subdivision allows that the document can be about rules, the main heading of “fantasy games” is still incorrect. The “Rules” subdivision could be applied to a reference book for the rules of hockey because hockey exists independently of this specific rulebook. TTRPG books are by their form the rules and the game itself. They cannot be rules for the subject of a TTRPG because the rules are the specific TTRPG. As such, it could be argued that the “Rules” subheading is technically inaccurate for a TTRPG itself and would be more appropriately applied to supplementary material that expand upon games or serve as explanatory guides. Works supplementing specific games, like *Vampire:*

*The Requiem for Dummies*<sup>82</sup> which aims to further explain rules for the game *Vampire: The Requiem* would be better described by the “Rules” subdivision. Though people have used and referred to these subdivisions as a way to make “Fantasy games” more accurate, they still fail to accurately express the form of the TTRPG. While catalogers should be encouraged to assign other subject headings to records for TTRPGs, a subject heading about its nature as TTRPG will make disambiguating them from works about TTRPGs in the catalog more difficult.

Though dedicated to material culture, AAT contains headings for both subject and genre/form. The heading “role-playing game” is a narrower term of the top-level heading of “Furnishings and Equipment.” All of these exist under the facet of “Objects,” one of eight facets in the vocabulary. Some facets, like “Associated Concepts,” pertain to subjects, and others like “Objects” and “Physical Attributes” pertain to genre/form. Being under the “Objects” facet, “role-playing games” is a genre/form heading. Though not immediately obvious on the heading itself, AAT can accurately describe the form of TTRPGs.

More ambiguous is Wikidata. Through its use of relationships, Wikidata is able to produce nuanced description of its headings. However, none of its relationships designate whether entries describe subject or form. This is a problem with the whole of the vocabulary, not just “Tabletop role-playing games.” It is unclear if this heading should be used to describe TTRPGs, literature about TTRPGs, or both. The heading does state through its relationship statements that it is an instance of “game genre,” but that does not designate the heading itself as a genre term, only an example of a genre. Though otherwise thorough, this inability to distinguish between subject and genre/form is a significant weakness for describing TTRPGs.

Much more straightforward are LCGFT and GTTG. Though the extent of what they cover differs greatly, their purview is exclusively genre/form. The purpose of LCGFT is to

provide terms to describe the genre and form of “most resources acquired by libraries with general collections.”<sup>83</sup> GTTG is, as its name suggests, exclusively for describing tabletop games by their genre. Both of these vocabularies are quite clear that they describe genre/form, which is necessary for describing TTRPGs. LCGFT and GTTG are unambiguous in their coverage and work for TTRPGs in this regard.

Table III, a comparison of controlled vocabulary by disambiguation

Controlled Vocabulary	Purview
LCSH	Subject
Wikidata	Unclear
AAT	Subject and Genre/Form
LCGFT	Genre/Form
GTTG	Genre/Form

## OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

LCSH lacks a definition that can make the necessary distinctions between TTRPGs and other roleplaying forms, and its narrower terms contribute to an inconsistent and unhelpful structure. Even with modifications of the LCSH form subdivisions, its status as a subject heading system immediately disqualifies it from accurately describing TTRPGs. However, it is still the most-used vocabulary for academic libraries,<sup>84</sup> and is therefore important to study. Even if it cannot be accurately used for TTRPGs themselves, it could still be used to describe works about TTRPGs if narrower terms were added for TTRPGs, CRPGs, and larps.

AAT similarly cannot distinguish TTRPGs from the other forms. While it establishes itself as a genre term, the hierarchical structure is too focused on the object as an artifact as opposed to a form. Wikidata has the most comprehensive definition, and its relationship-based structure allows for more nuance in its description than just hierarchies and facets. However,

some of these details do not properly encompass the variety that TTRPGs can display. Moreover, the Wikidata schema does not have a method of disambiguating subject and genre/form.

LCGFT is explicitly a genre/form vocabulary, but its definition and structure aspects fall short. Its definition does not provide any distinction between TTRPGs and larps or CRPGs. While LCGFT has headings for both video games and roleplaying games, their definitions are broad enough that “Roleplaying games” can still be used for CRPGs.

Finally, GTTG explicitly states its purpose as a genre vocabulary, and its intended application allows it to naturally make distinction between TTRPGs and other roleplaying forms. Its simple structure reinforces this, as all terms in the vocabulary are narrower terms of “Tabletop games.” The definition it cites contains stipulations that artificially exclude some TTRPGs. Aside from this shortcoming, GTTG provides the most solid heading for describing TTRPGs. Despite this, it is difficult to recommend the average academic library implement this vocabulary. The vocabulary’s narrow application, which lends it so much advantage in distinguishing TTRPGs from other roleplaying forms, also keeps it from being practically implemented by most academic libraries. While academic libraries have seen a swell in interest for TTRPGs, they are still a small part of collections. Implementing any sort of vocabulary as a local policy takes time and effort.

Table IV, a comparison of TTRPG headings by vocabulary of whether or not they meet criteria for accurate description

Controlled Vocabulary	Definition	Hierarchy	Disambiguation
LCSH	Fails to meet	Fails to meet	Fails to meet
AAT	Fails to meet	Fails to meet	Meets
Wikidata	Meets	Meets	Fails to meet
LCGFT	Fails to meet	Fails to meet	Meets
GTTG	Fails to meet	Meets	Meets

The most direct solution for this problem is for at least one of the listed vocabularies appropriate for genre/form terms to amend its TTRPG heading. Presently, the best choice of vocabulary for libraries looking to catalog these games is to use whatever vocabulary is already implemented. Slightly changing local policy regarding a vocabulary that is already part of practices is more practical than attempting to introduce an entirely new vocabulary for a small percentage of materials. Using “Fantasy games” with form subdivisions is technically incorrect, but it could still be used as a local policy as long it is used consistently within the collection.

However, settling for local solutions for an entire form of material does not ultimately lead to more discoverable records across institutions. Users cannot discover TTRPGs across institutional catalogs or in record repositories like WorldCat if each institution is implementing different techniques to describe them. As TTRPGs become more widely available in academic libraries, they will see more representation in these record repositories. Since best practices for cataloging TTRPGs are nonexistent, the TTRPG records currently in these repositories are important for establishing a foundation. If a heading could be assigned to all the TTRPG records in WorldCat, it could go a long way to cementing a practice. A standardized but imperfect description practice can be more discoverable than many variations of slightly better ones. A unified practice can also be more easily changed once a better solution is agreed upon.

The problem remains of how to implement these changes when, as established, TTRPGs are difficult to search for without also including other forms of roleplaying games. In a 2008 paper, Casey A. Mullin describes strategies for creating genre and form headings from existing LCSH headings.<sup>85</sup> By looking at existing subject heading fields as well as those that contain format-related information like the MARC 008 field, Mullin was able to automate the process of finding records for music media items and give them accurate genre/form headings. Automated

generation like this could quickly improve the accuracy and consistency of TTRPG records. TTRPGs provide some issues that music materials do not. Mullin generally uses subject heading fields to identify potential items, then references fixed fields to determine the general form. In this way, items that *are* jazz fusion can be differentiated from works *about* jazz fusion, as the musical works have audio-related 006 fields, and the scholarly works have text-related fields. As TTRPGs often take the form text materials, this cannot be used to easily separate the items themselves from scholarly works. Even with this initial difficulty, finding a way to help automate the distinction in a record could still be quite beneficial and worth further research.

## CONCLUSION

Controlled vocabularies currently offer no ideal solutions for describing TTRPGs. The headings assessed in this paper cannot be recommended for widespread use. Whether due to inadequate definitions like AAT, misleading structures like LCGFT, or incorrect disambiguation between subject and form like LCSH, current controlled vocabularies offer no viable options. GTTG comes closest, but its incredibly narrow application makes it hard to recommend for the average academic library. Local solutions such as LCSH subdivisions are not uncommon for libraries seeking to make their TTRPGs more discoverable. However, local solutions can lead to decreased discoverability across institutions, which will be more relevant as institutions introduce more TTRPG records into repositories like WorldCat. The most complete solution would be for one or all of these controlled vocabularies to amend their heading. As such treatment is not guaranteed to happen, other solutions must be considered.

Controlled vocabularies are not the only aspect of description that currently underserve TTRPGs in traditional catalogs. The elements by which users categorize and seek games are not included in traditional records or the discovery layer. Efforts have been made in some

institutions such as University of North Texas including facets for age range, number of players, and duration of play,<sup>86</sup> which are common parameters for user selection. Further work could also be done to differentiate types of TTRPG materials. TTRPG core books are what this article has discussed, which contain all the rules and guidelines to play a complete game. Supplements, on the other hand, expand upon existing games. Texts that further explore the setting of a game, books that offer expanded or alternate rules, and pre-made adventures for groups to play would all be considered supplements. Notably, supplements do not contain enough information to play the game that they are associated with. The supplemental book *The Karrakin Trade Baronies: A Lancer Setting*<sup>87</sup> cannot provide enough information to play the core game of Lancer the way that *Lancer Core Book*<sup>88</sup> can. Currently, there are no ways to disambiguate these forms of materials which have different purposes. There have been some efforts to include more faceted headings specifically for tabletop games. However, the ability to filter search selections by number of players needed or differentiate core from supplemental materials means little when TTRPGs are difficult to differentiate from CRPGs or materials about TTRPGs in the discovery layer.

TTRPGs are a small but growing part of academic collections. In addition to being of general interest in popular material culture, they are studied in the interdisciplinary context of history, literature, psychology, and sociology. Beyond their relevance to other fields, they represent a core component of games studies. All of these academic disciplines include TTRPGs as some part of their research. As primary source materials, TTRPGs need to be discoverable in libraries' catalogs in the same way audiovisual materials need to be. At the moment, TTRPGs are often indistinguishable in catalogs from videogames, boardgames, and secondary sources

about any of those previously mentioned. Proper subject headings would represent significant progress in allowing users to search for and find these unique items.

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