

GAME PUBLISHING LESSONS LEARNED

CREDITS

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thread and elaborate with new knowledge I have gained since then. The following chapters are updated versions of blog posts I originally posted on my website at <http://www.accessiblegames.biz>. Where necessary, I have updated them for this book to try to remain current.

Neil ran his own successful Kickstarter campaign for [Companions of the Firmament](#); I'd recommend checking it out.

SPECIAL THANKS

Special thanks to Neil Carr for beginning the Amateur Kickstarter discussions that ultimately spawned the series of articles you're about to read. I would also like to thank RPGGeek.com for hosting the forums where these discussions took place.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

In April 2012, Neil Carr, a member of the RPGGeek community, started a series of Amateur Kickstarter discussion threads. These discussions were partly his way of bouncing ideas off of the community and partly his way of getting advice about how to get started with a Kickstarter project he had in the works. I took part in these discussions and learned a lot of great lessons from them myself.

One year later, I wanted to reflect and share what I've learned from those discussions and from my own experience since then. The more we can learn from each other, the better off the industry as a whole will be.

In this book I recap, post-by-post, each of the 10 or so discussion topics raised by Neal. I'll touch upon the topics discussed in each

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CHOOSING LAYOUT SOFTWARE

ORIGINAL RPGGEEK POST

I've stepped onto the path of being an amateur RPG publisher via Kickstarter. I want to see how far I can travel from zero-to-hero and I'm looking for help along the way. These series of posts are in part just me thinking aloud, but also asking specific questions as I put the pieces together to achieve rpg publishing victory.

To kick off I'm thinking about what publishing software to use. I've been using Open Office for years now due to the great low price of free, though now that it isn't supported I've moved over to Libreoffice as it is being supported in the open source community. Both mimic Microsoft Office in all the types of functions you'd expect from that suite of software.

This stuff works fine for writing, and even for one-button PDF creation, but it isn't really meant to be publishing software, particularly if you want to include a lot of art, side bars, and other features that you'd expect from an RPG product.

For that you need layout software that is designed for you to easily move blocks of material around and format them to fit with whatever style you're trying to achieve on the page. The top of the line for publishing in general is Adobe's InDesign. It's powerful, it's complicated, and it's expensive! \$300 and you'd likely need to spend another \$600 on a course to understand how to use it.

For the amateur like me it's complete overkill and the price is so high that I'd need to jack the Kickstarter up another \$300 just to buy the software, and then be stressed out trying to figure out how to use this turbo charged engine while the backers gather their impatience. Too much risk all around.

One option is to leap back into the warm embrace of open source and go download

Scribus. It's kind of the Openoffice for InDesign, in [that it's] free, but still chock full of powerful features to pull off all sorts of layout needs.

Scribus saves money, but there is a learning curve to it. I'm not sure if I want to go this route at the moment.

Another option is PagePlus. This \$100 package is built for layout, and purportedly is also dumbed down enough to be able to jump into it and start producing. Is this the Goldilocks Zone of layout software?

So that's where I'm at right now in assessing what to go with next. Years of work are in Openoffice files ready to be copy and pasted out into some layout software. I'm trying to figure out my own particular time/money priority.

At some point in the future, when I've leveled up with RPG material published, I'd want the whole Adobe suite at my fingertips, so I'd see InDesign, the +5 Holy Avenger of layout, as something I'd want to wield, but right now I'm just trying to figure out if I should invest in a masterwork longsword or just grab a regular great flail.

Any suggestions on the above, or other things to be looking at?

MY THOUGHTS

I would like to point out a couple of things before I get started on the subject of layout software:

1. You don't have to do it all yourself.
2. You don't need to start with layout.

Most designers will start writing their books in much the same way that Neil or I did: using a word processing program such as LibreOffice or Microsoft Word. These programs are designed to handle large blocks of text and provide a wide array of formatting options. You'll write your manuscript and, when it's done, import it into a layout program such as

Adobe InDesign or Scribus.

When it comes time to do layout (and this won't necessarily be the first step after writing), you'll need to make an important decision: handle everything in-house by yourself or outsource the work to a professional. There are benefits and drawbacks of each.

LAYING OUT BOOKS BY YOURSELF

If you decide to do the entire layout yourself, you'll need to consider some of the things Neil did. Specifically, you need to figure out which desktop publishing suite you're going to use. There are a lot of options on the market, even more than what was discussed in the original post. Some of them are worth considering, some of them are not. Here are the basics:

WORD PROCESSOR

You may be tempted to use your word processor's Save as PDF function to export your layout. Don't. Word processors are fine for report writing, but they don't make very attractive books no matter how hard you try. Learn to use your word processor for organizing and writing your documents, but keep in mind you won't be able to truly do a professional publishing job with your word processor alone.

SCRIBUS

[Scribus](#) is the open source desktop publishing software of choice. It is free, but it has a steep learning curve and only supports importing files from the Open Document Type (.odt) file format used by LibreOffice and OpenOffice. If you're using Microsoft Word you may experience issues importing your documents, even if you use Word to save your files as .odt files.

A lot of people have had good luck with Scribus. Personally, I found it too cumbersome and, because I was using Microsoft Word as my word processor of choice, incompatible with my workflow.

SERIF PAGEPLUS

[Serif PagePlus](#) is the middle-of-the-road alternative to Adobe InDesign. I only had experience using the demo version of this software, but it had little problem importing my document and styles from Word and the interface is clean, intuitive, and easy to learn. Because the demo only allows about 20 pages of output, it isn't suitable on its own for large game books.

PagePlus X7 is only \$99 USD and you can find older versions online for less than that. It isn't as powerful or as industry-standard as InDesign, but it does a good job for the price. Several people swear by PagePlus, but most of what I have read online is from magazine layout professionals and not from game book professionals. Your mileage may vary, but PagePlus is probably just fine for anyone laying out a book. I'd recommend tinkering with the free trial first to make sure you can get a feel for it.

MICROSOFT PUBLISHER

I swear by Microsoft Office for my everyday needs. I find it much more powerful and intuitive than LibreOffice and would recommend it to anyone as a general office suite.

That being said, do not use MS Publisher to layout your game books if you plan on having them professionally printed. Simply put, it doesn't support the PDF-X/1a file standard that most professional print houses request. Some printers may be willing to do a conversion for you, but many of them will charge you extra for it.

Publisher also doesn't like to play with the CMYK color palette that is mandatory for professional print jobs. The options are available, but buried deep within some arcane menus, and many reports state that there is a bug which hasn't been fixed since Publisher 2003 that prevents black from outputting as true black. I have read of workarounds, but you don't want to be using workarounds for every single color you have to select in your entire document. It's just not a very productive use of your time.

Publisher is great if you're doing non-commercial products. It's easy to use when designing flyers for bake sales that will be printed from an inkjet printer at home. I would caution against using it for professional print designs though.

QUARKXPRESS

I don't recall anyone in the original RPG-Geek thread talking about this program, but [Steve Jackson Games](#) uses it for their layout needs. I have no personal experience with it, but from my research it appears it is every bit as powerful as Adobe InDesign--and every bit as costly. A full license of QuarkXpress 9 will set you back \$850 USD if you [purchase it directly from Quark's website](#). As of this writing, if you purchase Quark Xpress 9 you also get a free upgrade to Quark Xpress 10 when it is released.

QuarkXpress does offer a 30-day free trial if you'd like to tinker around with it and get your feet wet.

ADOBE INDESIGN

This is the +5 *holy avenger* of desktop publishing software and the one you've probably heard of already. It is industry standard, industry leading, and comes with a price tag fitting of such titles.

~~On its own Adobe InDesign can set you back \$700, but you'll almost certainly need to pair it with Acrobat Pro to tighten up your PDFs once they've been exported from InDesign. That'll set you back about \$450, bringing your cost to \$1150 USD. That doesn't include other parts of the Design Standard suite, so you'll need to shell out extra if you also want to get Photoshop and Illustrator to round out the whole package. You can buy the entire set for \$1299 USD as part of the Adobe Design Standard bundle. (See [Adobe's Buying Guide](#) for full details and up-to-date pricing.)~~

Adobe no longer offers Creative Suite products as individual purchases. You can buy older versions of the software online for a relatively low price, but the only option they now offer is their new Adobe Creative Cloud subscription software model.

Starting with InDesign CS6, you can purchase an [Adobe Creative Cloud](#) license. Creative Cloud allows you to lease the software from Adobe; you pay a monthly fee and gain access to the software for as long as you continue to pay. With Creative Cloud, you gain access to virtually all of the products Adobe has to offer starting at \$50 USD/month. To get that price, you need to purchase the license in one-year increments, so that's a \$600 USD up-front cost. It's still cheaper than buying InDesign outright, but a hefty price when you consider you still need to learn how to use the software.

Adobe makes it a little tricky, but you can also license Creative Cloud for \$75 USD/month without paying for a full year up-front. This is okay if you just need to use InDesign from time to time and can churn out a book in a month or two, but if you're just learning you'll need to spend several months just getting up to speed before you can start laying things out professionally.

Okay, so it's big and expensive, but is it worth it? That's ultimately something you'll have to decide for yourself. If you want the best-of-the-best, InDesign is the way to go. It does just about everything you could want from a desktop publishing suite, and once you take the time to get to know it (take it on a few dates, buy it a few drinks maybe) you'll find that it's a faithful and valuable investment. InDesign is the no-compromise software of choice, but if you just can't budget the price you're welcome to go with Scribus or PagePlus.

Personally, I took a college course on how to use Adobe InDesign and took advantage of a student discount to get the software on the cheap. They do offer student pricing on Creative Cloud, but eventually you will be required to upgrade to the full professional version. I have used InDesign for several projects and, though it does take some getting used to, I would highly recommend it. As it happens, the e-book you are currently reading was laid out with Adobe InDesign.

PAYING A PROFESSIONAL

If you're going to layout books on your own, understand that it is a big commitment. To make a gorgeous-looking book you need to understand a lot of industry lingo, such as CMYK, Bleed, Gutters, Leading, Kerning, PDF-X/1a, and more. It's a skill set unto itself that you may not choose to learn. That's okay. Nobody's going to judge.

Thankfully, there are a lot of people in the industry who have already learned that lingo and have already purchased the software so you don't have to. For less than the cost of a full InDesign license you can pay a pro to put your books together for you. They usually charge by the job, but in general a 200-page book will set you back around \$500 - \$700 USD. Considering the time you'll save and the level of quality you'll receive, it may be worth it to you to just hand over the reigns.

Check out 3d6design.com and EloyTheSaint.com for examples of industry professionals who do layout on contract. I also accept layout work at a reasonable price, so contact me if you have any questions.

WHAT I DID

I took a hybrid approach to the above two methods. Psi-punk is my first book and it's pretty big -- 192 pages -- so I wanted it to be done professionally. I hired Ruben Smith-Zempel (3d6design.com) to do the layout for

my first major product, and he worked with me to ensure everything's perfect. I enjoyed working with him and he offered me a very reasonable price. He's a gamer too, so he knows what it's like to be in my shoes.

On the other hand, Accessible Games has more than just one product planned. I wanted to be able to teach myself the ins and outs of publishing so I could eventually do all of this myself. I picked up a full license of Adobe Design and Web suite (which includes Dreamweaver and Fireworks in addition to the Design Standard products mentioned above) for less than \$500 with my student discount. If you happen to have a .edu e-mail address because you are a student or teacher, you may be able to pick up Adobe InDesign on the cheap as well, which makes the investment significantly easier to manage. While I was at it, I took a college-level InDesign course to teach myself the ropes.

Now my plan is to release smaller books by doing the layout on my own. Books such as Colors of Grey and Monster Kart Mayhem will be laid out in-house. I may still continue to hire people such as Ruben or Eloy Lasanta to help on large products, since their experience and expertise are valuable. It's worth it to me to know that I am getting a true professional to lend their touch to my products, and they lend their own street cred to the book by having their name in the credits section.

WHERE TO FIND ARTISTS (AND WHAT TO EXPECT)

ORIGINAL RPGGEEK POST

Art is vital to an RPG product. The products whole goal is to evoke imaginative responses from the user, and while one could effectively do that through writing, users aren't there to read a novel. Instead they want a tool for creativity and artwork acts like a springboard or guidepost to quickly travel into their own imagined worlds.

Artwork also has a practical use in organizing information in an RPG books. In general they are primarily used as reference material, getting picked up and flipped through to find a rule or world detail. Having artwork break up the blocks of texts and tables helps a user navigate the book more quickly, both because the art can act like an icon pointing out a specific section (pictures of equipment in the equipment section) but it also acts as a mnemonic device, creating mental bookmarks for the user to break up the books contents into their own unique memory storage system.

WHERE TO FIND ARTISTS?

Where to find artists to work for your project? There are websites such as Deviant Art which hosts a huge number of artist portfolios, so much so that it might be a bit overwhelming, particularly if you're trying to find a specific tone or style.

What I have found the most helpful so far has been the freelancing forum over at RPG.net. Here publishers can make open calls for work, and freelance artists can post their pictures and link to their websites to attract commissions. From what I see publishers make open calls there for a project and then after just a few days post again saying the submission response was

great and they were closing the open call to make a decision. So it seems like that forum alone might just handle the entire process.

Still, you're stuck with just those artists who happen to be paying attention to that website and forum. Another medium I found very helpful in delivering up a concentrated dose of artists that fit within the geeky comic/fantasy/sci-fi/horror genre that is a staple of RPGs is the magazine ImagineFX. It's a magazine who's focus is on digital artists in the geeky realms and shows off a healthy spread of artists each issue. The magazines are pricey though, costing around \$15 per issue. The magazine's website forums is a good place to look for people posting their artwork, though I haven't found an area to make publisher open calls.

HOW MUCH DOES ART COST?

How much does art cost? From what I've read it costs from \$25 to \$300 for the kind of needs of an RPG product. \$300 would be nice cover art, while \$25 is a quarter page illustration. Prices can go higher or lower depending on the artist. Established RPG artists might command much more for their work, meanwhile there is also a lot of amateur artists out there willing to work for free to get exposure, but those kind of variables are beyond what I want to do.

Another angle is to go with stock art. Zip over to DrivethruRPG and you'll find plenty of stock art albums for sale, and the prices are far far less than for commissioned pieces. I also found illodeli.com which specializes in one time use stock art licenses.

HOW MUCH ART TO GET?

Another big variable, but from what I've read the average is about one piece per four pages of a book, plus the cover and ideally something on the back cover.

WHAT ABOUT LICENSES?

There is a whole legal dimension to buying intellectual property which might not be immediately obvious. Unless it is specified in the purchase, the artist still has all of their rights for the work they created. So when you buy art from an artist, the time, expense and skill the artist uses isn't the only commodity be factored into the price, but also the legal rights the artist has to their work.

How the rights are negotiated really depends on the needs of publisher. For myself I'd want either complete rights, or something people have called "game industry rights" which is a broad set of usage for the purposes of the gaming industry. I'd want this so that I can reuse the artwork however I need for the product I'm making and future products. Ideally you'd be able to take that piece of art and use it on your website, in banner ads, in trade dress at conventions, in future products that you publish, etc. If in my zero-to-hero quest leads me to epic levels, and I'm a publishing juggernaut in 15 years, then I'd want the very first piece commissioned to still be usable even then for whatever business needs I had.

On the flip side, I'd want the artist to be able to capitalize on their own work. It seems as if I'm not the only amateur in the field. The artists are also just trying to do something creative and be compensated fairly for it. They ought to be able to display their work in online portfolios and perhaps even be able to sell prints of their work if it was unrelated to what your own product is doing in the marketplace. In the end it's supposed to be about creative people working together to make compelling material.

Unfortunately the pricing of licensing seems to be utterly opaque and mercurial from my own research. It's just a bunch of eyeballing based on the specifics of the publisher and artist and where they happen to be professionally in life. It would be great if there was some kind of industry standards, with x percentage being tacked on for specific degrees of rights being granted, but it seems in the end it's whatever gets agreed upon between the two sides.

BEING UPFRONT ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT

Due to all of this variance, I'm persuaded from what I have seen that from the publishing side what you really need to do is be upfront about the scope of your project and then let the artist respond. Say what you're budget is for the work you want and the kind of rights you desire and then let the artist do their own calculations on what they see is doable. The key thing though is to get all of this in writing upfront so that if a dispute arises down the road everyone is clear on what is expected.

QUESTIONS

Are there other good forums on the webs to find artists and broadcast open calls?

Any general advice people have on buying art for RPGs?

Are there boilerplate contracts that people are willing to share that they use with this whole process?

What kind of file formats should you be expecting from an artist to ensure quality printing?

Are there pitfalls that I haven't anticipated that ought to be?

MY THOUGHTS

There is a lot of good advice here, and Neil posed some great questions. Let's take this one step at a time. For starters, where do you find a good artist?

FINDING AN RPG OR BOARD GAME ARTIST

As mentioned, deviantART.com is a website designed for artists to showcase their work. Many artists who post their work on deviantART do accept commissions, but it can take a long time to find an artist whose work fits the style you are looking for and who also accepts commissions. Typically you would need to browse the site until you find an artist you like, then send them a private message and hope they respond. If you are diligent enough this will pay off in time, but it can be a lot of work.

Thankfully, there is a thread at RPGGeek in which users post samples of artists found through deviantART who are known to take commissions for RPG-style art. The [deviantART Commissions](#) thread is a helpful one-stop shop for locating artists who fit your style and are known in the community to do commission work, so you can narrow your search by looking through the list.

deviantART aside, you can also visit the [Game Freelancing Forums at RPG.net](#) and post an open call. Within a few days you'll probably have more than enough submissions to sort through. It is also common for artists who are actively seeking work to post samples of their art on this forum, so feel free to browse around and contact an artist individually as well.

A number of RPGGeek registered members are also artists. You can either post an open call in their forums or look up an artist you like using their database and contact them directly through RPGGeek's GeekMail system. This is how I found Melissa Gay, the artist I used exclusively for Psi-punk.

Finally, one of the best ways to find artists that I've found is to simply tap the power of social media. If you're not already active on Twitter, Google+, or Facebook (or, really, all three) you should probably start familiarizing yourself with the services anyway. Google+ in particular has a gargantuan RPG community. It isn't hard to get involved and wind up with 1000+ people in your circles, who you can then tap for help.

Case in point: I recently posted a message to G+ looking for a logo artist to do a new logo for Psi-punk. I simply posted the question: "Anyone know a good logo artist?" Within less than a minute (not an exaggeration) someone from my Circles had pointed out a logo artist he knew and, within minutes after that, I was chatting with a great graphic designer.

Which brings me to my final point on this topic: If you're looking for an artist simply ask around. I prodded fellow game designer Eloy Lasanta for a suggestion about an artist who could do whimsical monster-themed art for my upcoming game, Monster Kart Mayhem. He's worked with several talented artists on a wide variety of Third Eye Games products, and he was able to point me in the direction of someone he thought might be a good fit. You can now see some of the art Bradley K. McDevitt has done for me at <http://www.accessiblegames.biz/our-games/monster-kart-mayhem/>

The RPG community is relatively small and extremely friendly. Simply joining the conversation on any number of forums or networks will not only build good relationships with potential game players, but will build a solid recommendation engine for you to use in the future.

COST OF ART

Expect a wide range of quotes regarding how much an artist charges for their work. Neil's numbers are a pretty good indication of industry standards, from what I've encountered.

For Psi-punk, I paid \$25 for 1/4 page black and white, \$50 for 1/2 page, and \$100 for full page pieces. The cost per piece would have doubled each of those figures for color art, making them \$50, \$100, and \$200 respectively. For a full color cover piece I paid \$300, and a full color back cover would have cost me \$150 if I had chosen to go with one.

I have quotes from another artist who is offering \$20, \$40, and \$80 for 1/4, 1/2, and 1 full page illustrations, respectively. Again, double that for full color images. The artist is great, but my needs for Monster Kart Mayhem are

more simple so the lower cost per piece is reflective of that.

I have read of some people finding artists who were willing to work for free just to get some exposure, but I wouldn't expect to ask someone to do that for an entire RPG book. Personally, I advocate paying people as much as is reasonable for their work, as often as possible. Melissa was willing to wait for Psi-punk's Kickstarter project to fund before starting work on Psi-punk, and many other artists are willing to do that nowadays also. Expect to pay \$100 or more out of pocket for sample art before you try to raise money to crowdfund a project, if you intend to go that route. And please, don't ever, *ever* ask for "spec work" – that is, work for free based on the premise that you are speculatively looking to hire an artist. If you like their portfolio, ask them to sketch one of your ideas and pay for it, even if you don't plan on using it in the future.

SETTING AN ART BUDGET

Setting an art budget can be challenging. First of all, you're going to need to determine how many pieces you'll need and of what sizes you'll need them. This is dependent upon your project and, to an extent, how many pages it is in length.

Neil's post mentioned 1 piece of art for every 4 pages of your book. That's a good yardstick. Any more and you'll destroy your budget, any less and your book may wind up looking a little sparse. If you're on a tight budget, you can probably get away with one piece for every 5 or 6 pages of your book, but you'll need to make sure you use that space very wisely.

Vary the size of your art pieces. I reserved full-page pieces for chapter headings, 1/2 page pieces for larger sub-headings, and 1/4 page pieces for most everything else.

For Psi-punk, I commissioned a grand total of 54 pieces of internal art, plus 1 piece for the front cover. The book is 192 pages, so that's an average of 1 piece every 3.5 pages. My original estimate was that the book would be 220 pages, so I wound up with more art per

page. It's difficult to estimate page count since a fully laid out book will not have the same page count as your original manuscript, but that's okay. My original manuscript was 180 pages.

For this 180-page manuscript, I commissioned:

- 34 B&W (Black and White) 1/4 page pieces
- 11 B&W 1/2 page pieces
- 9 B&W full page pieces
- 1 Full Color cover

I came in slightly under budget on this project; originally I estimated 40 1/4 pages, 11 1/2 pages, 10 full pages, 1 front cover, and 1 back cover.

My total art budget was \$2750. I ended up closer to \$2300. Remember that this is for a 192-page black and white book. If you want to do color, expect to pay more. If you have more or fewer pages, expect to pay more or less, respectively.

I set a budget of \$500 for Monster Kart Mayhem. Because the art is going to be in color, but not heavily shaded or painted (it's more cartoon-style) I was able to negotiate a price that would fit my budget. Instead of paying \$40 per 1/4 page piece of color art, I am paying \$30 per piece.

WHAT ABOUT LICENSES?

Ah, legal matters. What can you do with the art once it's yours? Who truly owns it?

So far, the artists I've interacted with are completely okay with letting you have the rights to do basically whatever you want to do with the art after you've paid them for it. I'm not sure if it's just those I've worked with or if this is a pretty basic concept in the RPG community. It's generally understood, I think, that you will need the art to be printed in a book, distributed electronically in a PDF, and possibly used for logos, banners, and other promotions.

My recommendation would be to let the artist know that you want to be able to use the art you commission in any way you see fit. However, I also recommend letting the artist

know that they can continue to display your work in their portfolio and to sell it as part of separate bodies of work, such as an art book. Keeping things mutually beneficial tends to lead to fewer hurt feelings in the long run. If you really aren't comfortable with giving up any of your rights though, be up front about it. The artist may be okay with granting your wishes, they may have an extra fee for granting exclusive rights, or they may ask you to find a different artist. Any one of those things is okay. Just make sure all involved parties know what they're getting into before any money is exchanged and before any work has been completed.

GENERAL TIPS

I'm not yet an expert on RPG art, but here are a few additional tips I've learned.

WHAT KIND OF FILE FORMATS SHOULD YOU BE EXPECTING FROM AN ARTIST TO ENSURE QUALITY PRINTING?

You'll need your art to be as high quality as possible if you're planning on printing it. Ask the artist for images set to 300 dpi (dots per inch) in a lossless file format such as TIFF. Keep these files as originals in a folder separate from your working folder. If you need to use them for other purposes later, such as for display on the web, you can convert them to JPG or PNG and reduce their resolution to 150 dpi (for distributable PDFs)

or 72 dpi (for display in a browser). The artist will know what these things mean even if you don't.

PITFALLS TO WATCH OUT FOR

I chose to go with a single artist for Psi-punk because I wanted a consistent look and feel throughout the entirety of the book. Though Melissa delivered excellent art with a very consistent design, there was a drawback to my decision: it took far longer for her to complete all of the work than either of us had anticipated.

Even an experienced artist can't anticipate all of the complications life has to offer. That caused me some costly delays in the overall production time of Psi-punk, and the book came out several months late because of it.

If you're publishing a small book like *Monster Kart Mayhem*, one artist for the whole project is probably okay. If you're going to print a big book like Psi-punk though, I recommend hiring more than one artist. That way when life inevitably gets in the way you will have others to fall back on. I don't have an exact number for this yet, but 1 artist for every 50 pages of the book feels about right. The added benefit is that you've now added several artists to your "artist stable" and you know who to call on for future projects.

HOW TO TALK TO ARTISTS

INTRODUCTION

Recently I put out the word on Google+ to find an artist who could create some fantastic trade dress for an upcoming line of Pathfinder supplements. My experience was a bit bungled, to say the least. I realized, after inadvertently offending someone and receiving a few helpful bits of advice from someone else, that I didn't really know how to talk to artists in the gaming industry.

Sure, Psi-punk went okay, but I found Melissa Gay through mutual connections at RPGGeek and it was an instant match. I hadn't needed to contact anyone else or put out an open call. Now that I've had that experience, I'd like to share it with you. Additionally, I've spoken with some fine folks at the RPG.net community forums who've offered up loads of helpful advice in regards to interacting with artists, so I'll compile some of those notes as well. Hopefully someone can learn from my mistakes before they make the same ones.

WHAT WENT WRONG

Read for yourself:

[“I'm looking for a graphic designer to make a custom page border for a line of Pathfinder products and a matching cover template. Ideally I would use the same border/cover for a large product line, so having multiple colors would be nice. If you're interested contact...”](#)

That was my original post to G+. Short, non-specific, and painfully ignorant. But hey, it's a learning process right?

I received responses from a number of artists. Everyone had essentially the same questions to help clarify what I was looking for. Then I realized, I didn't really know myself.

What I did know is that I wanted a cohesive look and feel that I could use repeatedly across multiple game products. I wanted borders, cover templates, and sidebar box designs. What I didn't know is that this is the

“trade dress” that I've heard people speak of before. Thankfully, a helpful G+ commenter helped me identify that.

That wasn't the extent of my issue though. A couple of the artists I spoke with had offered to send me samples of what I was looking for. Another, more experienced artist simply sent me a link to their portfolio. When I asked that artist if they would mind submitting a sample as well, I learned another valuable lesson.

Asking for samples from artists, a process known as “speculation work” or “spec work,” is considered by many to be rude. I hadn't meant any offense, of course, and because two of my potential artists had offered to do this I assumed it was fairly typical. It's not.

It's an unfortunate fact, but many an artist has been burned by this type of work in the past. Some unsavory types will ask for spec work only to take the sample images and run with them, never to pay a dime. Well, now I know.

Then, of course, there was the issue of contractual arrangements. I had been told in the past that contracts are important for both the artist and the purchaser, since they spell out exactly what to expect from each party. I've since learned that they're perhaps not all they've cracked up to be, since contracts in this industry are just too costly to enforce. I'll talk more about that later.

Finally, in not knowing exactly what I was going to do with the art (from the perspective of putting it into layout software and manipulating it) I wound up receiving some really great art that I had trouble using. The files I received needed some tweaking before I could use them, because I didn't ask that the borders be on transparent backgrounds, I didn't specify the exact dimensions the borders needed to be, and so forth. It pays to be specific, and I certainly wasn't.

After all of this, I decided I didn't really know what I was doing when it came to talking with artists about commission work.

Thankfully the artist and layout professionals for Psi-punk were both highly experienced and were able to pry the right information out of me. I decided to go to a larger RPG community and ask for advice from industry artists and other professionals, and here's what I've learned.

ADVICE ON TALKING WITH ARTISTS

For starters, you can [read the original RPG.net thread](#) in its entirety if you'd like. Here are the high points.

1. WHEN A PUBLISHER CONTACTS AN ARTIST, THEY NEED TO KNOW HOW MUCH TO BUDGET AND THAT MEANS FINDING OUT WHAT ART IS GOING TO COST. HOWEVER, IT DOESN'T SEEM LIKE THERE'S A STANDARD "GOING RATE" FOR ART, AND IT REALLY DEPENDS ON EXACTLY WHAT THE PUBLISHER IS LOOKING FOR. SO: WHAT INFORMATION DOES AN ARTIST NEED UP FRONT BEFORE A ROUGH QUOTE CAN BE GIVEN?

When asking for a quote, it's important to be as specific as possible. Some artists will quote you a basic rate they set for all of their art -- for example, they might say \$25 for every 1/4 page B&W image or \$100 for a full page B&W image. Double that if you'd like color instead. A lot of artists don't feel that's a good way to price their own work though; 1/4 page illustrations may be as simple as a single piece of line art or as complex as multiple characters, a background, and lots of shading. Some artists prefer to charge by complexity, which is much harder to estimate but offers a more fair rate for the artist.

When asking for a quote, be as specific as possible. Know what you want before you ask. Some people advise even waiting until the layout process of your book is finished before you begin commissioning interior illustrations, since you can then know exactly how much space you need to fill (I'll tell you though, some layout artists prefer to have all of the art in hand before they begin work, so this is a tricky situation to navigate). At the very least, you need to know:

- Size of image, including bleed. For illustrations, it may be enough to say 1/8, 1/4, 1/2, or full page. You can shrink or stretch art slightly

to fit a specific slot in your layout, but it's generally better to shrink it than to stretch it so estimate on the large side of things if necessary. For trade dress, such as border art, make sure you know the dimensions of the space you wish to fill with a border; if your border is going in your 1/2-inch page margins and you don't want it to spill into the rest of the page, make sure you request the border art be no more than 1/2 inch thick. Of course, you need to remember to account for bleed which may be about 1/8 inch.

- Color of image—full color, greyscale or line art.
- Image resolution if it is higher than 300 dpi. Standard image resolution is 300 dpi (dots per inch).
- File format. For internal illustrations, .TIF allows for a lot of image detail without a bunch of image compression, which allows you to alter the image in many different ways before plugging it into your final layout. For border art, you may need to ask for Transparent PNG files, which will let you put the border around a page and leave room in the middle for text (you could also put the border on a background layer and let the text "sit on top of" the image).
- Timeline. Do you need this done immediately or is this project going to stretch over the next several months?
- Number of illustrations needed. This helps develop a timeline (see above).
- Intended style. Fantasy, Sci-Fi, Comic, Children's, or something else?
- Rough idea of image content (number of figures, action vs still, portrait vs landscape, background/no background, etc.).
- A link to artwork that matches the style and complexity you are looking for (preferably from the artist in question's own folio).

With all of that in hand, you should be able to get a reasonable estimate. Now an open call for art may look something like this:

"I am looking for an artist to do 20 1/4 page shaded B&W illustrations. Images will vary somewhat, but I am looking for a High Fantasy theme and the images will have between one and three characters, with backgrounds.

I have about three months before this project needs to be completed. Here's a link to a style similar to what I'm looking for."

Notice that you don't necessarily need to mention file type and image resolution unless you're looking for something very specific. For example, if you'd prefer to have your images submitted in vector format you would want to specify that, since it isn't usual (most images are raster-based unless they are specifically designed with a vector-based image program). You can hash out the details of image resolution, file format, and delivery method (Dropbox, Google Drive, snail mail) once you've begun talks with the artist.

2. TRADE DRESS? ILLUSTRATIONS? LINE ART? WHAT AM I EVEN SUPPOSED TO ASK FOR?

Now that we've tossed around a few of these terms, let's attempt to define them.

Trade dress is the external appearance of a product which indicates the source of the product (publisher trade dress) or, in a broader and less exact sense, connectivity between multiple products from the publisher." It's the cohesive look and feel of multiple products. Take a look at a shelf full of Pathfinder or D&D books. They often have very similar borders, fonts, covers, parchment-colored backgrounds, etc. You can look at a Pathfinder book and tell it's a Pathfinder book just by noting a consistent look and feel.

Illustrations are pieces of art which accompany text in a book. Most of your book's interior art, the pretty pictures that everyone likes to look at, are illustrations. They may be full color, black and white, with lots of detail or with little detail. Illustrations will likely make up the largest percentage of your art budget.

Line art is any image that consists of distinct straight and curved lines placed against a (usually plain) background, without gradation. This is usually a style of illustration.

3. SPEC WORK. SHOULD I ASK FOR IT?

The short answer? No. It's generally considered rude to ask for spec work. The consensus is that if you wish to find out if you and a potential artist work well together you should offer to pay for a piece of art up front. You can ask for a less complex, less costly piece of art, but the point is that you agree to pay them for what they're doing for you. If you like their work, you can agree to continue working with them. If it wasn't what you wanted after all, you can thank them for their time and find someone else.

I know that it's scary to pay for work you may or may not use, especially since margins on RPG products are so small to begin with. It's important to remember though that we're all in this business together, and we need to treat each other like people. You wouldn't expect someone to ask you to design a game for them, or even a subsystem of rules for them, without agreeing to pay you for your time and effort, would you?

4. CONTRACTS. SHOULD WE EVEN BOTHER?

There seem to be two different camps on this one. Both sides agree that there isn't any money in litigation when it comes to the RPG industry; it costs too much money to try to enforce a contract that someone else breeches.

Camp 1 says that because it's too costly to bother enforcing contracts, you shouldn't bother wasting your time on them. Camp 2 says you should still draft and sign contracts because they let each party know what to expect from one another.

If you're in Camp 2, don't expect artists to have a contract waiting for you. You'll need to provide one yourself. You can find sample art contracts online, but whether or not you choose to take it to a legal professional and get it notarized is up to you. It's probably not worth the hassle unless we're talking about several thousands of dollars though.

In most cases, I think it's just best to expect the best from people. Work out some very specific details about timeframe, payment methods and schedules, and the work you ex-

pect to have done. Agree on everything before work begins, but then trust the other party to do their part honestly and with integrity.

Also, be sure that you both agree on who owns the art after it has been paid for. This is probably the one aspect of the deal that Camp 2 people are concerned about the most. In my opinion, it's fair to allow the artist to retain copyright so they can use it in their own portfolio, but to grant you permission to use it in any way you see fit. Agree that no other third party can use your art, and you're both satisfied.

5. OTHER GENERAL ADVICE

Aside from commissioning art, you'll need to discuss with your artist how to pay for it. Nowadays PayPal is commonplace and most people use it, but I have had requests to mail physical checks for payment because PayPal charges a fee to process payments.

Also, it's proper (and sometimes requested) to pay a deposit before work begins. The artist may request a certain amount as a deposit, or you may just offer 50%. That is, you pay 50% of the final quote up front, before the work begins, and the other 50% upon delivery of the final product. This ensures the artist is paid for their time even if you flake out on them, and it means you don't get what you've asked for until you finish paying -- there's no taking the art and running with it.

You may be asking yourself what's to prevent the artist from just taking the money and running. That's why you're only paying 50% up front. It works both ways. The artist doesn't get the rest of what they've asked for until they deliver.

If you're uncomfortable with the arrange-

ment, you may ask to negotiate different deposit terms. For example, maybe you'll pay 25% up front, 25% upon delivery of the first mock-up or example illustration, and the final 50% upon receipt of the final product. It requires more steps and transactions, so you may need to offer to pay the additional per-transaction fees yourself (rather than expect the artist to eat that cost). Remember, every exception you ask for is one you should be willing to compromise on.

That does bring to mind one more thing: what happens if you're not happy with the work? Before work begins, negotiate with the artist how many revisions you can ask for before their fee increases. Some artists will be comfortable making minor edits to an image without charging you extra, but a complete redraft takes just as much time and energy as the first, so understand if they don't allow for unlimited revisions.

You can protect yourself from revision nightmares by being specific with your requests to begin with. The more detail about an image you can offer up front, the more likely the artist is to deliver what you're asking for. [Here's an interesting story](#) about a designer who wasn't specific enough with his request.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I am sure I still have many mistakes left to be made before I can consider myself a true expert in this area, but learning from mistakes is what I do best. I'll keep you posted with any updates I have, but in the meantime please leave your comments and suggestions about your own experiences or advice.

DESIGNING A BOOK'S LOGO/TITLE

ORIGINAL POST

It's one thing to make some wacky title effects for a flyer with those pre-defined options in Word, however faced with trying to sell a compelling book I wonder, "what the heck am I supposed to do with the title?"

Part layout, part art... what do people do here if you want a professional look? I'd assume all of this could be handled by layout software such as the expensive Adobe Illustrator, is there a Scribus equivalent for Illustrator?

How many people hire artists?

What is the Deviant Art of graphic designers?

What kind of prices should one expect to pay for book title graphic design?

MY THOUGHTS

This question seems pretty simple at first: how does one go about creating an appealing logo for a game? The answer is, of course, not as straightforward.

In my opinion, a logo needs to do two things: 1) display the book's title in a legible way so people can easily identify it; 2) convey the feeling of the game in an aesthetically-pleasing manner.

Part 1 is easy if all you do is print the game's title in giant text on the cover of the book, but it won't meet requirement number 2 if that's all you do. You need to manipulate that text in some way to make it describe your game visually: if you're creating a sci-fi game it needs to look futuristic, a pulp game needs to look pulpy, and a cartoonish game needs to look cartoony.

If you don't have any clue where to begin with making your logo fit the feel of your setting, you're probably better off hiring a graphic designer to do the job for you. If you already dabble in graphics design there are

a number of great programs -- both free and otherwise -- you can use to do the job.

GRAPHICS SOFTWARE

If you subscribe to Adobe's Creative Cloud, you'll already have access to Adobe Illustrator and Adobe Photoshop. As I understand it, Illustrator is the preferable of the two programs for creating appealing logos; it creates vector-based illustrations rather than raster-based images, which for the non-graphics designers among us basically just means you can scale the images to fit any size without it getting blurry or blocky. That's important, because your logo will be printed in a lot of different ways and in a lot of different sizes, so you'll want an image file that can handle being re-sized with ease.

The open source alternative to Adobe Illustrator is called [Inkscape](#). As with many open source programs its interface is a little tricky to get used to sometimes, and it may not possess all of the features that the \$1,000 alternatives do, but it's very powerful and it will certainly do the trick if you're designing graphics on your own.

In either case, you'll need to create your logo at 300 dpi resolution using CMYK color options if you intend to print it using any sort of print-on-demand or traditional print house. The same goes for any image you create for your books.

HIRE A GRAPHICS DESIGNER

If you, like me, are not a graphics designer you may wish to consider hiring someone to design your logo for you. It will cost you, but possibly not as much as you think. Many artists are willing to work within your budget. This is where I recommend turning to Google+ to simply put the word out that you're in the market for an artist; you'll have plenty of bites in no-time.

If your social media circles aren't yet very large, you may also consider using 99designs.com to hire an artist. At 99designs.com you can post a job and receive samples from several different designers at once. You choose the one you like best and pay for it. The downside is that you aren't necessarily working with someone in the RPG industry, so you can't be sure whether or not the people who submit samples will fully understand the look and feel you're going for. This is where being specific really pays off.

Here are a few things to consider when hiring a graphics designer. I wish I'd known these things when I was looking for a designer for Psi-punk.

- Know what you want. When you put out a call for artists, let them know you want a logo for [insert your game's name] and that you want a certain kind of feel (sci-fi, pulp, fantasy, cartoonish) for it.
- If you know your upper limit for your budget, be up front about it. If you can't afford more than \$75, say so.
- If you already know the color scheme your cover is going to use, let your graphics designer know they need to design the logo to match. (More on this in a bit.)
- It's okay to ask to see an artist's portfolio; it is generally considered rude to ask them to create you a sample before you offer to pay (more on that in the next article).
- That being said, once you've paid them a deposit and they've begun work for you, it's okay to ask for a reasonable number of revisions. Work with the artist to determine what a "reasonable" number is.

MY JOURNEY, MY MISTAKES

Here's a step-by-step process of what I did when hiring my first logo artist for Psi-punk. Avoid my mistakes.

First of all, I put a call out to Google+ for graphics artists. This was not a mistake. Within literally less than 2 minutes I was connected with a talented artist who was willing to work for cheap. \$35 was the asking price for

the logo and he was willing to make minor revisions and all of the color changes I desired.

Mistake #1: The mistake was that I didn't include my budget or a description of what I wanted at the time I put out the call. I lucked out in finding someone who was talented and willing to work for cheap, but I wouldn't recommend betting on luck.

I knew what I wanted at the time. A sort of flesh-meets-steel look for the Psi-punk text that showed off the "cyber" part of cyberpunk. Add some cool lightning effects, make them purple to seem kind of meta-physical, and voila. Easy as pie. Right?

I worked with my logo artist at length to get the colors and the lightning to look and feel just right. He did an amazing job of doing just what I asked him for. I paid him, with a bonus, and sent the logo to my layout artist.

Mistake #2: I hadn't bothered to match the logo to the cover image. My logo was flesh-toned with steel grey for the cyberware and purple for the lightning. The cover image was blue and black. It clashed horribly.

I didn't ask my logo artist to match anything to the cover image. I worked independently with him and wound up creating something that looked great on its own but terrible as a whole.

Mistake #3: This all happened when things were coming down to the wire. I admit that I hadn't commissioned a logo soon enough in the game's lifecycle and I didn't leave myself much time for revisions. Rather than being able to ask my logo designer for a major overhaul (which I may have had to pay additional money for, since a major overhaul falls outside the realm of "minor revisions and color tweaks") I had to once again rely on luck. Thankfully, my layout artist is also a superb logo designer and was able to quickly whip up an amazing logo that matched the cover and conveyed the feel of the game. I wound up paying one talented artist for work that I didn't wind up using though.

So what did we learn?

1. Be specific when seeking an artist.
2. Know exactly what you want and need; don't just have a vague image. If your cover image is already finished, send it to your logo artist (if they're not the same person who designed the cover) and ask them to help you match your ideas with the cover art. If you're working in the reverse order, send your logo to the cover artist and ask them to match the cover to the logo.
3. Leave yourself enough time to make revisions. Don't get caught waiting until it's time to layout the final pages of the book before you turn in your art to the person doing the layout (whether that's yourself or someone else). Leave yourself enough time for *everything*.

CONCLUSION

Whether you're designing your logo yourself or hiring an artist to do it for you, it's important to consider your game's appearance. The logo is going on the cover of the book, and it's going to be one of the first things anyone notices about the game. Make it count.

CHOOSING VIDEO PRODUCTION SOFTWARE FOR GAME TRAILERS

ORIGINAL POST

Having a video to present your project is something that you need to consider. One thing that was a surprise though in the survey I took is that simply having a video did not translate into success. For the successful projects 74% used video, but even for the unsuccessful projects there was still 66% that used video.

There are a lot of reasons why crowd-funding succeeds or fails and when looking over 150 of these projects I saw videos which were painfully long, or otherwise cringe inducing in their production, but which nonetheless did fine. There were also some projects which had decently produced videos, but the project didn't end up reaching it's goal. Further, there are some wildly successful projects that didn't bother with a video at all. So while a video can be important, there is still a lot of alchemy at work with the rest of the project to be successful.

There is also just the reality that video is its own art form. People with talent and skill will be able to put together a powerfully compelling video with nothing but the barest of tools. I have friends and family in the video and film industry and have even done a small amount of work on a few film and video sets, so I know how vast the skill and knowledge base there is to digest. I want to put that aside for the moment and just ask what kinds of digital tools should I be aiming for that I can leverage to make a compelling video?

I have access to an HD video camera. I grew up making goofy videos with friends and I think I have some natural eye to what you should do in terms of framing shots, editing, sound, script writing, etc.

In the last decade I've made some use of

software to do "Ken Burns style" video productions, with all of the zooming, panning, and so on of fixed images, overlaid with sound. It works fine, but it would be great to go beyond that.

I'm a PC user, but if I absolutely have to I could borrow an older Mac laptop if need be, but it would be far more convenient to do it on a PC.

What is the InDesign (expensive, but not super expensive) of video editing?

What is the Scribus (open source and free) of video editing?

Where can I go to get inexpensive sound and music for post-production?

What is a good sound editor to trim and adjust music and sound effects to fit with the needs of the video?

How did the effects in Technoir get made? Is it completely out of reach for the amateur to pull off that level of slick effects?

MY THOUGHTS

At first glance, this post has a lot more to do with preparing to launch a Kickstarter project than publishing in general, but today's Internet audience is fascinated by video and it is a powerful tool when marketing a product as well. Even OneBookShelf will be implementing product videos on its pages for electronic and print-on-demand books, so it's time to familiarize ourselves with some amount of video production.

You don't need a fancy camera or high-end video editing software to do a basic promo video. In fact, I used Microsoft PowerPoint and [a free audio editing program called Audacity](#) to hack together my promo video for the Psi-punk Kickstarter. For reference, I have linked to it here: <http://youtu.be/oFi6n8VaRR8>

It's not terribly pretty, but at the time I didn't even own a webcam and I was on a tight budget. About 44% of all people who started watching the video watched through to the end, and from what I have heard (anecdotally), that's not a bad percentage.

Nowadays nearly everyone owns some form of video camera -- be it on their smartphone, their digital camera, or a webcam they use on their computer -- and that's sufficient for at least getting some video onto the screen. I purchased a Logitech C615 HD webcam for \$70 from Amazon, which is a great camera capable of shooting 1080p video and comes with basic editing software. If you need to shoot a basic promo video, something like that is really all you need. You can film yourself talking at the camera and edit together as many takes as you need to get a coherent stream of footage to place in front of your audience.

GOOGLE HANGOUTS

One other great option that has recently emerged is Google Hangouts. This software is free and runs in your browser as a simple plug-in. You can use it with any webcam to take video of yourself talking or to take video of a group of people talking. Best of all, you can set your Hangout to be "On Air," which will record the video and upload it to YouTube automatically. That YouTube video can then be used for your Kickstarter pitch video if you desire, or it can be downloaded and edited for further use.

I used Google Hangouts to run an actual play demonstration of Psi-punk during the Kickstarter campaign: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1UFXU8BUcw>

I also used Google Hangouts during an interview with Christopher Helton: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0m3bxMfI-8>

These were both basic, effects-free videos but they demonstrate what you can do for free (provided you own a webcam). You can re-use the YouTube video as much as you'd like, and you can upload it to other websites as product demonstrations as well. It's pretty raw, but for a new publisher on a budget it's perfect.

OTHER SOFTWARE

Admittedly, I don't have much experience with other video editing software. If you want to do a spectacular video like the one used in the [Technoir](#) Kickstarter, you're going to need some additional time to research how to use video editing software.

If you subscribed to the [Adobe Creative Cloud](#) service that I mentioned in [Part 1 of this series](#), you may already have access to [Adobe After Effects](#) and [Adobe Premier Pro](#). These are the InDesign of video editing; everything you'll ever need (and more) in video editing software is contained in these products. It's great if you're already subscribing to the Cloud, but not necessary if you aren't.

If you're not subscribed to Creative Cloud, those programs are incredibly expensive and probably not worth your time unless you're planning on making video your other hobby or career. Instead, you may just want to use some basic editing software that comes pre-packaged with your operating system.

Windows comes with Movie Maker, which you can also [download for free](#) if you don't have it. If you're running Mac OS, you likely have a copy of [iMovie](#) hanging around.

As a final note, Neil mentioned in a follow-up to the original post that he wound up using [CyberLink PowerDirector 11](#) to edit the video he made for his Kickstarter project. For about \$75, this is sort of the Serif PagePlus of video editing. It offers all of the tools a non-professional might need without breaking the bank. If you find the free software just doesn't do what you want it to, but you don't want to spend a fortune on high-end video editing programs, this may be the way to go.

HIRE HELP

Of course, you can also hire someone with the tools and skills necessary to help you edit a video. If you want something that looks really slick but don't want to develop an entirely new set of skills and become involved with an entirely new suite of software tools, this may be the best compromise for you.

CONCLUSION

Internet video is here to stay. It's not just important for running a Kickstarter campaign, but it's good for promoting your games in the future as well. As a game designer, you may not wish to get involved in the process of editing high-end videos, and that's okay. With Google Hangouts or some free video software, you can cut together something basic that will do what you want it to. All you really need is a small investment in a webcam (if you don't already have one) and you're ready to go.

For those who are interested in the creative side of video making, there are a ton of options at your disposal. I just touched on the surface of what's available, but chances are if you're interested in creating high-end videos you're probably already more knowledgeable on that subject than I am. If you're not, consider taking a college course on the matter (and use your student discount to pick up some high-end software for cheap).

If you're not happy with freebie software but want promo videos that really shine, you may also want to consider hiring a professional. There's something to be said about tapping the talents of others, and there's nothing wrong with supporting other people in the hobby.

CROWDFUNDING CAMPAIGN MARKETING 101

ORIGINAL POST

What about marketing your crowdfunding project? What should you do? What I've already gleaned from copious forum reading is that you should start with a "soft launch" prior to the actual funding campaign to begin. You send out press releases, write on forums and basically announce that a funding project is going to begin soon. You take every opportunity to talk about the project and just start spreading the [word]. That way when the funding finally begins there is hopefully already a pool of people ready to contribute.

So where do you broadcast?

Obviously you do it on the Geek. Send off a geekmail to one of the RPG newscasters, post something in the press release forum, and depending on the specific item your producing, there might be other places on specific system or game pages that might fit.

The Geek is great, but you have to range much farther out. Next go to RPG.net and post in the stickied thread there that covers RPG crowdfunding projects.

Giants in the Playground's forums also have a general RPG area where you could post an announcement.

After that though, at least from my corner of the net, things begin to contract into more specialized sites devoted to certain genres of RPGs. At that point the kind of product you're creating may fit within that game's culture. If you're making some kind of D&D offshoot product, perhaps under the OGL then you still have plenty of places to post. Paizo for Pathfinder related material, Dragonsfoot for OSR material. Enworld for a little bit of everything D&D related.

Once you've spread the [word] through forums you're going to have to consider if advertising on RPG [websites] is worth your time. I'm seeing plenty of Kickstarter ads now so plenty of creators think it's prudent. RPG.net sells in \$25 chunks. The Geek doesn't publish their prices, you have to contact them directly.

You could also consider using Google and Facebook as advertisers, not because it is necessarily dramatically effective, but rather because the price is very cheap. You can set your budget very low, like a dollar a day, and have thousands of impressions get tossed out each week. With Facebook in particular you can drill down and target very specific demographics, so the benefit there is that you could spend \$30 over the course of a campaign and hopefully the highly targeted ads will keep hitting RPG gamers over the course of that month, it could be a little reminder which they eventually click on.

You should have a page on Facebook that is devoted to your product or publishing studio and promoting that as best you can devise in your own social network. Likewise having a Twitter account needs to be assumed, and just tweet updates galore.

As for banner ads, presumably you'd have some artwork already developed by the time the funding campaign begins. It seems like standard practice to just crop a part of your cover art, add in some text, or if you get fancy create an animated gif. Since reaching that 30% mark early in the funding period it seems fairly persuasive to at least pay for advertising to cover the first week of the campaign and then the final week.

Overall my impression is that it make sense to budget around \$100 for advertising for the campaign, though that's just my own vague read of it. Perhaps you ought to be spending more, but at least in my situation that would mean cutting deep into the budget for the initial artwork that would be getting presented on the Kickstarter page.

That brings us to the core part of the marketing is the crowdfunding page itself. You really ought to have something compelling and presentable on the page when it launches. In the previous question about artwork, it was pretty clear that there is a huge variance in what you'll get with your dollars from artists, so it's possible that you could pay someone \$25 and get a fantastic piece that lights a fire under the backers. Still, it seems far more prudent to spend at least \$100 on art. I'm aiming more towards \$300 spent by the time the campaign begins.

QUESTIONS

What other RPG sites should people be paying attention to when they want to post to forums and promote their work? Aside from the Geek and RPG.net, are there any other big generic RPG sites?

Does anyone have tips or suggestions for software that deals with creating banner ads? Sure you can make these in Windows Paint if need be, but are there more flashy packages that will help the novice create an animated ad that grabs the eye?

What about initial budgets? What sounds like a good amount to budget for advertising? What kind of initial art budget should be aimed for before the campaign launches?

MY THOUGHTS

Marketing is a big investment of both time and money, but it's important when you're trying to get your voice heard. Word of mouth remains the most powerful marketing method, but how do you generate that buzz to begin with? And how do you do so without breaking the bank?

I'll let you in on a secret: Other than the \$100 I spent on the preview image for Psi-punk, my total marketing budget for the project was \$0. I spent not a penny and wound up with a successful project. That being said, it wasn't easy and I only reached 103% of my funding goal, and I honestly couldn't have done it without some generous support from close friends and family. If I had to do it again I still don't think I would have spent money on advertising, I am not sure I would have paid for marketing banners and advertisements, I just would have began buzzing sooner and offered more hands-on perks (such as playtest and preview drafts of the book) as Kickstarter backer rewards.

Here are some tips:

START BLOGGING EARLY

I started blogging about Psi-punk about 7 months before the Kickstarter began. That seemed like sufficient time to generate some content that I could later point people toward if they wanted more information about the game. You'll find links on the Psi-punk Kickstarter Page that point back to many individual blog posts which discuss the setting, the world, and the game's mechanics.

Originally I only included a link from Kickstarter to the main blog page. It didn't help me much. When I updated the Kickstarter page and added a list of links to several specific posts which talked about the game world, setting, and mechanics, I noticed a strong uptick in both traffic on the blog and Kickstarter pledges. People are lazy and don't want to have to work for their information, so remove those barriers and they'll be more likely to behave the way you'd like.

Having a blog set up for your game also helps you push out updates to readers after the funding campaign ends and gives you a place to ask for continued support. I received 4 additional pledges and 1 upgraded pledge through PayPal as a direct result of offering the option through my blog. The funding doesn't have to end just because the KS campaign does.

Finally, get hooked up with related blog networks like the [RPG Blog Alliance Network](#). Every time you publish a new blog post, they send a tweet to all of their followers on Twitter.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

Now that you're blogging about your game, you need to have eyes on it. This is where social networking comes into play.

Here's another secret: I've long hated (*hated*) Facebook and Twitter. I used to believe they were stupid websites where people went to talk about what they had for breakfast, complain about work, and share stupid cat pictures. While that is still the case, you don't have to get involved in that crowd.

There are actually a lot of great people on Twitter, Facebook, and *especially* Google+ who are into RPGs. Get to know these people, follow who they're following, circle who they're circling, and just begin talking like a regular person with all of them. You're better off getting involved sooner, rather than later -- I didn't sign up for Twitter or Facebook accounts until just a few months before my Kickstarter campaign, and that meant my social presence on those sites wasn't very big.

For Twitter, get involved with #RPGChat, a Tweet Chat event held every Thursday night. I met a lot of great people in #RPGChat, including my editor, my layout artist, and several other great individuals who've helped boost my signal.

On Google+, get involved with various RPG communities. Circle and follow folks and join the discussions. Consider yourself lucky; these communities weren't there even one year ago when I got started. Here's a list of a few com-

munities you should get involved with:

[RPG Designers Network](#)

[Tabletop Podcasters](#)

[Hangout RPGs](#)

[Pen and Paper RPG Bloggers](#)

[Tabletop RPG Kickstarters](#)

[RPG Community](#)

As for Facebook? You've still got me there. I still only have 12 followers on my Facebook page.

INTERVIEWS, DESIGNER DIARIES, AND GENERAL HUB-BUB

Now that you're building contacts within the community, use some of those to your advantage. Many people you now know are podcasters, website owners, and bloggers who would love to help you spread your word. Talk to some of the Tabletop RPG Podcasters about doing an interview on their show, ask about submitting a Designer Diary to their website or blog, and so forth.

[Roleplayers Chronicle](#) features a weekly designer's diary column. Contact Aaron Huss and ask him if he has room for you to submit one. Contact him well in advance so you can secure a date that coincides with your funding campaign.

Try to do as many interviews as you can, and try to get them in different formats if possible. If you're able, do a video interview, podcast interview, and e-mail interview -- or do more than one of each for better results. The more you talk about your game, the more interest you may generate.

PLAY YOUR GAME WITH OTHERS

You have a game. You want people to play it. Make that happen.

Take your game to local conventions and let your players know how they can find more information about it after they go home. I took Psi-punk to a local convention several months before the Kickstarter campaign. I honestly didn't know if anyone who played the game wound up checking out the Kickstarter proj-

ect until I went back the following year to the same convention. I ran into one of the people I ran the game for the previous year and he said he'd been receiving all of the updates about the game and he was looking forward to its release. Nice!

Virtual conventions are also becoming pretty popular. Most of these use Google Hangouts and Roll20.net to facilitate a weekend of convention-like gaming. Check out [Indie+](#) (for conventions and gamedays), [AetherCon](#), and the upcoming [VirtuaCon](#) (hosted by RPG-Geek).

When running con games, remember the 4 Ps: play, play, play, and pimp. Your game should be more about having fun and showcasing how awesome it is than talking about your funding campaign, but don't forget to at least let people know it's coming (or already happening). If they genuinely enjoy your game, they'll follow up on it. If they get annoyed by marketing pitches, they probably won't.

FRIENDLY LOCAL GAME STORES

Many FLGSs have message boards where you can post flyers or leave business cards. Before leaving media pinned to their board, ask the owners (or employees, at least) if it's okay to do so. Make sure you leave a compelling flyer with some kind of art, a link to your website or blog, and a Kickstarter funding date. You can use a URL shortening service like [Goo.gl](#) to make a short-hand version of your Kickstarter URL that people can more easily access, and you can place a [QR Code](#) on the flyer that people can scan with their smartphone to go directly to your site.

An example of the flyer I made for Psi-punk is on the next page.

I made this using MS Publisher, but you can use GIMP, or even MS Paint if you need a free, simple solution.

Also on the topic of FLGSs, don't forget that you can offer retailer rewards through your Kickstarter campaign. I e-mailed several game stores in my area and offered to run a game of Psi-punk in the store after the game's

release in order to help sell the product they receive as part of the Kickstarter campaign. Two of the 6 stores I e-mailed also pledged.

FINALLY, FORUMS

This partially goes along with Social Networking, but I saved it for last because there are a few key considerations to make when posting about your game on web forums.

For starters, nobody likes a spammer. Don't just show up, spam your game, and go home. Certainly don't do this more than once.

Many websites have a dedicated Kickstarter announcement thread or forum where people can advertise their games. It's okay to post in these forums. Post only when you have updates to make that are significant: when you announce your campaign *will* happen, when you announce your campaign *is now happening*, when major milestones are met, and when the 48-hour final push begins.

It is best if you actually join some RPG communities and frequent them as a regular person even before your marketing begins. This is similar to the advice on starting your blog several months to a year in advance or gathering followers on social networks. It's okay to let people know you're working on a game, to post a URL to your blog in your forum signature, or to occasionally post an announcement about it. Do not simply spam your announcements every chance you get though, or you'll encounter a fair amount of resistance.

My personal favorite forum is [RPGGeek](#) (surprised?). They have a [Kickstarter Announcement Thread](#), a [Kickstarter GeekList](#), and occasionally post updates about ongoing RPG Kickstarters in their news section. As an added bonus, you can get your game set up in the RPGGeek database and start using game-specific forums to post updates, images, preview files, etc.

[RPG.net](#), [EN World](#), and [Paizo](#) all have very strong communities behind them as well. Consider getting involved and posting announcements on those forums.

Finally, make sure you submit your Kickstarter campaign URL to the [RPG Kickstarters](#)

[Tumblr](#). I believe they also post to EN World when they post a new project, so that's double exposure for you.

CONCLUSION

These are just some of the techniques you can use -- and *should* use -- to promote your game. They're all free, provided you have the time to devote to their efforts. The bonus is that you'll not only gain exposure for your

game and your funding campaign, you'll meet a lot of great people along the way.

You don't need to spend a lot of money to successfully fund a campaign or market your game. You do need some internet etiquette and some time to devote to marketing, but your effort will pay off both in terms of funding and friendship.



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PSI-PUNK

A Fudge-based cyberpunk RPG
<http://psi-punk.blogspot.com>



Join the Kickstarter at <http://goo.gl/HCYQM>

CHOOSING A GAME BOOK PRINTER

ORIGINAL POST

I'm wrapping up a survey I did of 150 RPG related crowdfunding projects that has occurred over the last 12 months. There is a lot of interesting patterns that emerged when you lump all of that activity together. One pattern that came through very clearly is the desire of backers to have printed material for rewards, not just PDFs. There was plenty of PDF backing, but backings for print beat out PDF by a decent margin.

I've been tinkering with game design for over a decade, however I've always held back from taking the plunge because I never felt I was in the right position to take on the financial risks. Now Kickstarter has come along and solved that part of the issue, however there is still the need to get books printed which casts an intimidating shadow. I've read countless articles about the game industry and all of the complicated issues, financial risks, even acts of God, that involve getting books printed. You have CMYK issues, economy of scale, proofs, cargo containers, fulfillment services, garages filled with boxes, and that baffling tax issue with holding inventory (why are you being taxed for having a bunch of stuff you paid for sit around in a building?). In the end it all just seems so... logistical, in a tedious way.

Anyway, over the years I longed for print-on-demand to finally solve all of this. Now evidently the time has arrived. You can go to Lulu.com and get all the books you want printed out, and for prices (like \$6 per book) that from a layman's perspective seem pretty cheap. BUT, why bother with Lulu when you could just go to RP-GNow and print out books for even less, and have your product integrated cozily into an RPG exclusive marketplace?

I set up my publisher account with RP-GNow and was rather surprised at how

cheap it is to just print out your book. Say you want to print out a 64 page book with black and white interior. It's just \$3.76 per copy. If you're rewarding it for \$25, then your margin is going to be something around \$18 after you take out shipping and the Kickstarter fees.

Wow! That's a lot better than the \$10 you're getting for the typical PDF reward level. From the survey I did it's clear people are more than happy to pay for the print product and so the natural desire for print, matched with the large margin, can really help get all the development and artwork with the project. Going with a hard-back option and you're almost doubling your margin again.

I feel like Sir Robin in the Holy Grail at the Bridge of Death as he exclaims, "That's easy!" and then marches to his doom. What's the catch? Is it really that easy?

Besides my surprised incredulity, the one thing that seems to be missing from this print route is a fancy leather bound option. Where do you go to get RPG books printed out in a fancy "deluxe" fashion?

MY THOUGHTS

Traditionally, printing a book meant finding a printer and ordering a minimum number of hard copies to be made and shipped to you. Each printer had their own minimums, but from what I have read that number could be around 1,000 copies or so. Unfortunately, many RPGs don't ship more than a few hundred copies during their first run, so that would leave publishers with stacks of books to put into storage until they could find some way to sell them off.

Then came print-on-demand (POD). Publishers no longer have to worry about carrying an inventory on their own; they can simply upload a PDF to the printer and, when someone places an order for it, the book gets printed and mailed directly to the purchaser. This is

slightly more costly on a per-book basis than ordering a bulk quantity of 1,000 or more books, but the initial cost to the publisher is low -- in some cases even free.

There are three big name POD retailers on the Internet today: Create Space (owned by Amazon), Lulu, and Lightning Source. One-BookShelf (the most popular RPG-specific retail website for PDFs, which includes websites such as DriveThruRPG and RPGNow) uses Lightning Source for their print on demand needs.

Each of these services charges a different percentage of royalties on top of the cost to print the book; that's the cut of the profit they get from your sales. The amount varies, but I'll show you a breakdown of each of these services using Psi-punk as an example (*note: as of the July 2013 update to this article the page count for Psi-punk is officially 192, but I will continue to use 220 pages as the example*).

CREATE SPACE

Amazon is one of the world's leading internet retailers, and they back that up with a ton of services available to small business owners and self-publishers alike. CreateSpace is their independent publishing arm, and it's great for traditional authors.

Here is [a breakdown of CreateSpace's royalties](#).

Amazon's royalty percentage varies based on the sales channel through which a customer purchased your book. If the customer bought directly from Amazon, that percentage is 40%. If you paid the extra \$25 fee to get listed on other affiliate sites, their cut is a humongous 60%.

In addition, they charge a fixed cost based on printing fees. If your book is full color it will cost significantly more than a black and white book.

Psi-punk is a B&W book with 220 pages. If it were printed through CreateSpace, their per-book fixed charge would be \$0.85 + 0.012 per page. That would total up to \$3.49.

To calculate my total, I need to set a list price. Psi-punk will list at \$30 for the softcover version of the book. So the breakdown:

$$\$30 - \$12 (40\%) - \$3.49 = \$14.51.$$

So I would make \$14.51 per book. As a side note, if I hadn't gone the Kickstarter route and I used this royalty rate to fulfill all orders of Psi-punk, I would need to sell roughly 241 books to make up the roughly \$3500 invested in the project.

Finally, Amazon has [this helpful royalty calculator](#) so you can determine your cost per book without having to look at charts and do the math by hand.

LULU

Lulu is a big player in the POD market. They have a complete (and dizzying) array of book binding, paper size (trim size), paper quality, and other options. If you have very specific needs, they're a good bet.

It took me quite a bit of digging to finally find some specifics about how to price a Lulu book. Here are a couple of helpful links:

[Lulu Manufacturing Cost Calculator](#)
[Lulu Commission Rate](#)

I haven't found a simple chart that lays out pricing for each option, but after an hour of digging around their site and Googling for answers, I'm giving up on that quest. The calculator + Commission page should help us figure out our costs.

For Psi-punk, I'm going with a 220 page, B&W, Perfect Bound book. Perfect Bound is your standard book binding option for the majority of game books. Lulu also offers Saddle Stitched (popular for adventure modules) which is basically a stapled cover around a packet of paper, Coil Bound, Dust Cover, and a few other options.

For 8.5"x11" B&W pages on Standard paper, my manufacturing cost per book is \$10. Lulu also offers "Publisher Grade" paper which reduces the cost to \$7.80, but I have a feeling that paper isn't sufficient for books with full-page art.

Lulu also charges a 20% commission on all books sold. They take this commission out of the net cost after printing, so if I sell a \$10 book for \$30 they would get $\$20 \times 20\% = \4 .

That would make my takeaway \$16, which means I would need to sell 219 books to cover my costs.

There's one other catch though: Lulu's distribution partners *also* take a commission. If Lulu sells your book through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, or some other distribution channel (a service I believe you need to buy into), their partners take an additional 20%. That means my \$16 profit is now \$12, or 292 sales.

In order to get the most out of Lulu, you need to focus on direct sales; selling your book directly through Lulu's website, which means directing your customers there from your own website or social media channels.

ONEBOOKSHELF

I saved this one for last because it's the biggest player in RPGs. OneBookShelf (OBS) owns DriveThruRPG and RPGNow, as well as half a dozen other websites. They use Print On Demand services through Lightning Source, but they're significantly cheaper than going through Lightning Source yourself because they've already covered all of the set-up fees you would ordinarily have to pay. They also have a huge marketplace with an audience that visits their websites with the intent to buy games.

You need to sign up for a free publisher account to gain access to their chart of POD costs, but it's the simplest to find and understand of all three of these companies. Their chart is a big table with every option you have and the costs involved with each option. Here's the table row for the costs associated with printing Psi-punk:

- Softcover
- Black & White
- Large
- 108-1,200 1.60 + .02 per page (U.S.)
- 1.20 + .015 per page (U.K.)

That's a Softcover, B&W, Large format (8.5" x 11") book with a page count ranging from 108 to 1200.

For a 220 page book, I'll spend $\$1.60 + \0.02×220 pages, or \$6 per book.

OBS has two different commission percentages based on whether or not you are an exclusive seller. If you sell only through OBS websites, they take 30%. If you would prefer to have the option to sell through other channels, their commission is 35%.

Since I want to have the option to sell Psi-punk directly through my website or through other channels in the future, I am not an OBS exclusive seller. That means they'll take 35% of the net sales after manufacturing.

$\$30 - \$6 = \$24$. $\$24 \times 35\% = \8.40 . So their cut is \$8.40, which means my final cut is $\$30 - \$6 - \$8.40 = \15.60 . That means I would need to sell about 224 books to make up for my \$3500 investment.

OBS looks good. I take home just barely less than what I would by printing with Lulu, but they have a built-in marketplace with a qualified audience. Many RPG publishers will tell you that their sales through RPGNow far surpass their sales through other channels, so it will take a lot less time to recoup that initial investment.

WHAT'S THE DEMAND?

Okay, so we've covered the costs of printing and we've found it's actually quite cheap to go with a POD service these days. You don't need to worry about 1,000 book print runs and a garage to store all of your leftovers in. But with the gradual shift toward PDFs and other electronic book formats, is it even worth your time to bother with setting up POD services? The short answer: Yes.

Tablets have really taken hold at the gaming table, but they're still not as easy to reference as a book you can just flip over and thumb through at the table. Books don't require a battery charge or an internet connection, either. There's still a lot of value in the printed page to a lot of people, and it's important not to leave them out.

Here's some more math:

The [Psi-punk Kickstarter](#) had 111 backers total. Since then, I received 3 more pledges and 1 pledge upgrade through my [Support Page at the Developer's Blog](#). That's a total of 114 backers, only 8 of which did not pledge at a high enough level to receive at least a PDF copy of the book. That means $114 - 8 = 106$ people will receive a copy of Psi-punk when it ships.

Only 41 out of 106 people opted for the PDF only pledge, and of those I received feedback from at least one person that they would have preferred a hard copy but didn't want to pay the international shipping rate. Still, I'll count that person as PDF only.

That means of the 106 people who are receiving a copy of the game, ~38.7% are only receiving PDF copies of the book. The majority of backers, about 61.3%, opted for hard copies.

This is just one Kickstarter project, but if we analyzed others I am sure the results would still favor hard copies over electronic-only copies of the book.

CONCLUSION

The barrier to entry for publishing RPGs has been dramatically reduced over the past couple of years, and now virtually anyone can get into the market. If you do, consider your options carefully about how you want to sell your products. My recommendation would be to use OneBookShelf for your PDF and POD distribution needs, but to leave your options open to sell through other websites such as [d20pfsrd.com](#), [e23](#), [paizo.com](#), and others.

HARDCOVER, SOFTCOVER, OR BOTH?

ORIGINAL POST

I have several projects in development and they all have different specific needs and formats. One thing that I've been exploring lately with Kickstarter campaigns is when to offer a hardcover copy?

What is a pretty standard RPG Kickstarter campaign is that you'd offer three versions of your work: PDF, softcover, and hardcover. However what I was wondering is if there is a threshold at which a book becomes too short in page length to warrant a hardcover?

I've been pulling RPG books off my shelf and looking them over to see how long they are and where the "hardcover zone" seems to exist within my collection.

You're typical D&D splatbook from the 3.5 era ran from 158 to 224 pages, all of which seemed fine as a length for a hardback book, though when you compare to the bulk of my collection there was an abundance of books that fit within this page length that were softcover, such as Call of Cthulhu books.

The book with the lowest page count that was still a hardcover was the The Collected Book of Experimental Might which came in at 144 pages. It is noticeably thin for a hardcover compared to the others, but not so much that it seems unwarranted.

Beyond that, the only other hardcover I have that have very low page counts in the house are children's books. There are plenty that are only 20 pages in length, and seem completely appropriate for that market, but I can easily imagine people wondering why a length reserved for adventure modules would be wrapped up in hardback. One other key difference with children's books is that the pages seemed to be thicker than what you'd find in a standard RPG book. That likely gives a bit more thickness and heft which wouldn't

exist with the typical channels of printing with 70 lb paper.

One other factor that is in play with Kickstarters is that hardcover copies can be seen as just a special perk. So that even if the book is only 32 pages in length, if it is seen by a backer as a very special item for them, or is just a way of providing more patronage dollars to the author, but getting just a little extra perk out of the process. In that regard I could see offering that up as an option. I can also see that being a complaint, but that could just be the nature of a wide internet audience.

QUESTIONS

Do people see some page length threshold for warranting a hardcover?

From the backer's side, what is generally seen (if that could even be discerned) as an appropriate use of the hardcover option?

From the author's side, are there any other factors at play in the decision to include a hardcover or not?

MY THOUGHTS

PRINT-ON-DEMAND

This one actually seems pretty straightforward after you analyze the situation a bit. In fact, Neil even answered his own question in a follow-up post in this thread. Neil writes:

The way I'm seeing it is that POD is effectively blurring the lines between any of these distinctions. I'm not envisioning funding being there to create a print run, it would just be there to pay for art, layout and whatever other little bits of production are needed to get it to a clean product. Once the backer rewards go out then the main avenue of getting the book would be via RPGNow and other types of sites. I guess if the demand was there then I could go to RPGNow, make a POD print run and then get it sent out to distributors, but that

would be the distributor paying for product. The older model of economies of scale and risking money on inventory wouldn't really exist. The amount of books being bought from the market would be the amount being printed.

So in that regard the differences between PDF, softcover and hardcover becomes an individual aesthetic choice on the buyer's part. It isn't something that I would be involved with directly.

Essentially, if you're using one of the many print-on-demand services like [I discussed in part 3 of this series](#), it's easy not to worry about the format of the book. All you need to do is create one good-looking PDF and a couple of separate cover files, upload them to your printer, and let the user decide on whether they want hardcover, softcover, or electronic.

Even though POD is so easy, there are a few considerations that need to be made in regards to how much time you'll spend setting up the different formats.

First of all, some publishers choose to simply use the same version of their electronic file (we'll call that the source file) for print as they do for PDF. This serves the basic purpose of offering an electronic book alongside a print book, but there are some key differences in the way people interact with the two that can make a world of difference if you treat them as separate entities.

PDFs are read on a variety of devices, from desktops to laptops, tablets to smartphones, and even on eReaders such as the Amazon Kindle. None of these natively handle PDFs very well unless the PDF is tagged, bookmarked, and indexed properly. It's another topic entirely ([read my bookmarking and tagging tutorial](#)) to do all of these things to make a PDF really eBook-friendly, so let's just say that you're doing your fans a much bigger service if you *do not* simply output your source file and upload it for digital distribution. Take the extra time and care your book deserves to, at the very least, tag and bookmark the PDF (it's really not that difficult).

That being said, your softcover and hardcover source files will be practically identical. The only difference is that, if you choose to use an ISBN for your books (something that's a wise choice when distributing books to retailers; I'll talk more about that in a future post as well), you'll need slightly different versions of your cover source file. Each cover will need to have a different ISBN: one for the softcover and one for the hardcover. You may even use a different SKU, or inventory number, to make tracking different versions of your book easier.

Note: If you're using OneBookShelf, they specifically request that you *not* list your book's ISBN on the barcode on the back of the book, because they generate their own barcode when they send your files to Lightning-Source for printing. You may still wish to list an ISBN on the interior copyright page of the book or on the back cover, outside of the barcode. Many publishers choose to list the ISBN for all three varieties of books on a single page, which means they don't have to produce three different credit pages.

After generating different cover source files, upload them to your POD printer of choice. You will need to order a test copy of each version of your book before you can offer them for sale, but that added time and cost is minimal.

It should be pointed out that it costs more money to print hardcover books than it does to print softcover versions. Simply increase the purchase price for the hardcover by the extra cost, rounded up to the nearest \$1.

TRADITIONAL PRINT RUNS

If you're having your books printed the old-fashioned way, there are many more considerations to make. Each version of the book is considered a separate product, and you normally need to print several hundred books in a single run to make the cost viable. This means if you want to distribute both a hardcover and a softcover book, you may wind up needing to purchase 1,000 or more total units. That gets pricey.

A lot of people really like a nice hardcover book. Of the 55 or so people who backed Psi-punk at *either* the softcover *or* the hardcover level only (so not including higher backer levels, which may include both versions, or retailer levels) 16 of those backers were willing to pay an extra \$20 for the hardcover version of the book with no extra perks. Were the cost difference closer to \$10, I imagine that number would have increased.

The question is: at what page count is it worth offering a hardcover book, especially if you choose to only go with one version to save on costs?

This is really a design and aesthetic issue, if money is no object. It's hard to say, but hardcover books do range in page counts from very low to very high, so perhaps page count isn't the best measure.

If you're publishing and printing through traditional channels, you need to look at the up-front costs. How much more out of pocket do you need to pay to print an equal number of hardcover or softcover books? Unfortunately I don't have exact numbers for this, but

if it costs \$3 more to print a hardcover book and your minimum order is 500, that's an extra \$1500 out of pocket. Can you sell enough books to justify that cost?

If you have experience publishing books via traditional printing methods, I'd love to hear your experiences and see your exact numbers, because this is one area in which I have no real experience. Personally, I would recommend new publishers simply use POD services and leave the high up-front costs to the big publishers.

CONCLUSION

To hardcover or not? That question depends on your printing method. If you're going with POD, there's nothing to worry about; there's limited additional costs on your part, and consumers favor having extra options. If you're doing a big print-run you shouldn't necessarily consider the minimum number of pages, but rather the up-front expense that you'll need to cover just to get that print copy to market.

ISBNs – THE UNEXPECTED EXPENSE

INTRODUCTION

I recently rounded out the Game Publishing Lessons Learned series with an article about [Post-Kickstarter Fulfillment](#). Though that brought an end to the topics raised over at RPGGeek, it wasn't the whole story about what I learned during my first foray into game publishing.

When the layout process was nearing completion for Psi-punk, I got an e-mail from Ruben (the layout artist) asking me for the ISBNs I would be using for the book. At the time I had a general understanding of what an ISBN was (it's a 10 or 13-digit number that uniquely identifies your book) but I didn't know the significance of having one. More importantly, I didn't know that it could potentially be a huge added expense. I found myself scrambling to educate myself about ISBNs and find an inexpensive solution to be able to provide them to my layout guy.

WHAT THE HECK IS AN ISBN?

So what exactly is an ISBN, and why is it potentially a huge expense? Here's the [official answer](#):

About ISBNs

What is an ISBN?

"ISBN" stands for "International Standard Book Number".

The ISBN identifies a book or other book-like product (such as an audiobook) in a specific format and edition, but also the publisher. If an ISBN is obtained from a company other than the official ISBN Agency, or one of its channel partners, that ISBN might not identify the publisher of the title accurately. This can have implications for doing business in the publishing industry supply chain.

What is the purpose of an ISBN?

The purpose of the ISBN is to establish and identify one title or edition of a title

from one specific publisher and is unique to that edition, allowing for more efficient marketing of products by booksellers, libraries, universities, wholesalers and distributor.

Are there other resources for ISBNs?

If you are located in the United States, or a territory of the USA (Puerto Rico, Guam, US Virgin Islands, etc.), Bowker is the official registration agency of the ISBN.

For more information about the ISBN standard, [visit the International ISBN Agency](#)

[ISBN-information.org's FAQ](#) gives us more useful information:

An ISBN is essentially a product identifier used by publishers, booksellers, libraries and internet retailers and other supply chain participants for ordering, listing, sales records and stock control purposes. The ISBN identifies the registrant as well as the specific title, edition and format.

Okay, so the ISBN identifies a specific publisher, book and edition. What does that mean?

When you register an ISBN, you submit information to an international database that maintains detailed information about every registered book. Not just every book though, every *edition* of every book.

Let's say you're publishing an RPG in three formats: Hardcover, Softcover, and PDF. Each of these books is considered a separate edition. Each edition requires its own unique ISBN. If you would like to publish as ePub and Mobi, those each require their own ISBN also. A single book could easily require 5 ISBNs, or even more if you publish in other accessible formats, such as DAISY, large print, Braille, or audiobook.

This is all to help maintain a detailed database of books. A retailer or librarian can look up an ISBN and know exactly which version of which book is found. It's helpful.

Unfortunately, it's also costly.

WHAT IS THE COST OF AN ISBN?

Each country has a single licensed registrar, and each registrar is allowed to set the price they choose to charge for ISBNs. You'll have to consult your country's own registrar for specifics, but here are a few common ones ([thanks, Wikipedia](#)):

Australia: In Australia ISBNs are issued by the commercial library services agency Thorpe-Bowker, and prices range from \$42 for a single ISBN (plus a \$55 registration fee for new publishers) through to \$2,890 for a block of 1,000 ISBNs.[13]

Canada: In Canada Library and Archives Canada, a government agency, is the responsible entity, and there is no cost. Works in French are issued an ISBN by the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec.

United Kingdom and Ireland: In the United Kingdom and Ireland the privately held company, Nielsen Book Services, part of Nielsen Holdings N.V., is the responsible entity, and there is a charge. ISBNs are sold in lots of ten or more.

United States: In the United States the privately held company RR Bowker is the responsible entity, and there is a charge, which varies depending upon the number of ISBNs purchased, with prices ranging from \$125.00 for a single number.

So if you're in Canada, you're in luck. But did you notice that last entry on the list?

"...with prices ranging from \$125.00 for a *single number*." Emphasis mine.

That's right, in the United States a single ISBN, when registered through the official US issuer, costs \$125. Don't worry though, Bowker sells them in blocks of 10 for *only* \$250. Too bad you'll blow through those with just two to three books.

Bowker also sells ISBNs in lots of 100 for \$575 or 1,000 for \$1,000 (don't take my word for it, see for yourself on [Bowker's pricing page](#)). Notice how quickly the cost per unit declines? The pricing model is skewed heavily toward larger publishers who require large blocks of numbers. For a self-published author like you and me, 10 ISBNs for \$250 is your closest bet, but you may wind up sitting on a bunch of ISBNs you don't need or won't use for a while.

DO YOU NEED AN ISBN?

As with many things, whether or not you really need an ISBN sort of depends. If you listen to Bowker and other registrars, they'll tell you that you always need an ISBN for all of your books. Of course, it's in their best interest to tell you that, isn't it?

Because the official answer is always "Yes!" I'll give you an unofficial answer from my own opinion, research, and experience.

If you have any intention of selling your book in a retail store, you'll need an ISBN for each edition of your book. Retailers depend on the ISBN to look up books in a database and enter them in their own store's systems. Without an ISBN, it complicates the matter for them. If you're running a Kickstarter campaign and choose to offer a Retailer reward level, expect to purchase a block of ISBNs. You may want to build that into your funding goal (I didn't).

If you're just planning on selling PDFs through websites like OneBookShelf or d20pfsrd.com, the answer isn't as straightforward. While OBS does allow publishers to enter an ISBN, few people will search for your book based on that number. d20pfsrd.com doesn't even bother with them.

If you're publishing "micro PDFs" (short books intended only for PDF formats) then I wouldn't suggest bothering with the whole process.

ARE THERE CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES?

You could move to Canada. Unless you already live in Canada, in which case you're not sweating this issue any more, are you?

Officially, you're supposed to go through your country's registrar. That allows you to register yourself as the publisher of the book. Bowker [has this to say](#) about purchasing ISBNs elsewhere:

I see ISBNs for Sale on other services, is this legitimate?

Bowker forms relationships with many companies who purchase ISBNs on your behalf, as part of their many other publisher services. There are also many companies not affiliated with Bowker who purchase them in their names and package them in their service.

Before you buy an ISBN from anyone, find out who will be the registered owner of the ISBNs you purchase. If you are not the publisher, the company who provides you with an ISBN is required to provide your Title Data. Many people struggle to get their Title Data added or updated when they do not control their own ISBNs.

If you have questions about an ISBN offer online, contact The US ISBN Agency with details of the seller, and the price, for clarification.

So it is possible to register your ISBNs through a different service, but it's important to note that the alternative service will be listed as the book's publisher. Let's take Amazon's CreateSpace service as an example.

CreateSpace offers an ISBN for free with every book sold using their service. Using CreateSpace's free ISBN lists CreateSpace as the publisher, and it may be difficult to get your books into non-Amazon bookstores while using one.

You can also purchase ISBNs from any one of a zillion ISBN resellers on the internet, but you have to exercise caution. That reseller's name will be listed as the publisher on record for your book, and it is up to them to register your title with the Books In Print database. If

they don't give you tools to register the ISBNs yourself, you're at their mercy to get it entered. And what's the point of buying an ISBN to begin with unless you have it entered into the database?

It's a tricky situation to navigate, to be sure. Pay the high fees to get yourself listed as the publisher or risk the drawbacks of the cheaper route?

WHAT I DID

I risked the drawbacks of the cheaper route. I purchased a block of 10 ISBNs through [ePub-Bud.com](#) for \$70 (or \$7/each). They offer you the option to use their website to register your books with the Books In Print database and claim to not hold any rights to your books.

Because I'll only be selling through online marketplaces such as OneBookShelf and d20pfsrd.com, I decided this was an adequate trade-off. I do have my books available in three retail stores, but I distributed those books to the stores via my OneBookShelf POD orders and so far haven't heard of any issues.

CONCLUSION

The topic of ISBNs is a tricky one, and I haven't heard it discussed on any RPG-related message board or advice column before now. To go through the traditional purchasing route, at least in some countries, can be very expensive and it's a lot to ask from an indie publisher. I'm looking into ways to perhaps offer ISBNs to other indie RPG publishers myself, so I can treat people in our industry with the care, respect, and caution they deserve while not forcing every indie author to shell out tons of money to a registrar. I'll let you know if that becomes a possibility.

In the meantime, carefully consider your options when publishing your books. If you're going with electronic distribution only, you probably don't need to worry about an ISBN. If you're printing traditionally or planning on putting your books onto retail shelves though, it's a beast you'll need to contend with sooner or later.

HOW TO DISTRIBUTE GAME PDFs TO BACKERS

ORIGINAL POST

How does one distribute PDFs to many people if the PDFs are beyond the scope of email allowances?

Typically email isn't going to let you send or receive files above 20 megabytes, so if you have a PDF that is bigger than that you need another solution to distribution.

You could do it through RPGNow, but to go that route you'd either have to give the PDF away for free, or send vouchers to customers which you have to purchase from RPGNow, which means your not getting any real funding from the crowdfunding project, or at least RPGNow is getting a 30% cut.

Eventually you would want to have your PDF set up on RPGNow for regular sales, but this is just an issue for getting the files to the backers of the crowdfunding project.

There are other routes, such as Dropbox, but you don't have much control who's downloading the files, and it requires the backer to get a Dropbox account.

One could raise a lot of philosophical questions about file sharing with this topic and whether a creator should even be that concerned with who gets the file, but I guess I'm just more interested in figuring out if there is an inexpensive technical solution to the problem.

Does anyone know of some kind of media sharing inventory service, so you can share files and know when/if your customer was able to download the file?

up for both sites is identical and setting up on one site will get you set up on the other -- it's all one system now, they just have different color schemes.

If you're uploading your first product to OBS, you need to give it some time to go through an approval process. This can take 1 to 2 days according to the website. I uploaded my first product, Colors of Grey, back in January so I thought I wouldn't have an approval timeframe anymore but sure enough Psi-punk still went into a holding zone for a couple of hours.

While I was waiting for OBS to approve my product for sale, I decided to send the PDF to my backers via e-mail. This process is much simpler than it was even one year ago, assuming all you care about is getting your product to your backers and not monitoring how many people access your files. Here's the method I used:

DISTRIBUTE VIA GOOGLE DRIVE

If you don't have a Google account, they're free and easy to set up. They also come with a Google Drive account, which lets you host files and send download links to as many people as you'd like. I found this to be fast, straightforward, and much easier than using a service like Dropbox or GitHub. No super top secret passwords or additional login credentials are required.

UPLOAD AND SET SHARING PERMISSIONS

First, upload your file to your Google Drive account.

MY THOUGHTS

I am distributing Psi-punk via OneBookShelf (OBS), which means it's being sold on both RPGNow.com and DrivveThruRPG.com. Set

Next, right-click on the file you want to share and select “**Share...**” then “**Share...**” again. If you’re using a Mac, well, I’m sure there’s some other way to access the Share menu.

1. On the **Who Can Access** panel, select **Change...** This will let you change the permissions for the file.

2. Distribute the Link to Backers

You’ve enabled anyone you share the link with to download the file. You can now do one of two things to get the link to your backers:

1. Copy the link on the Share Settings panel and paste it into an e-mail or Kickstarter backer update.
2. Use GMail to attach the file. In GMail, you can now directly attach Google Drive files without having to re-upload them, and without the need to worry about attachment size limitations.

I chose the latter option because not every Kickstarter backer was going to be receiving a full copy of Psi-punk, so I didn’t want everyone to have access to the link. This posed its own set of challenges.

First of all, I had to get everyone’s contact information from Kickstarter into my GMail contacts. That means setting up my own contacts database.

HOW TO IMPORT CONTACTS FROM KICKSTARTER TO GMAIL

First, generate a backer report from Kickstarter. KS will create several spreadsheets for you -- one for each backer reward level you offered. These will have usernames, e-mail addresses, and contact info that you received from your backers when you sent out your backer survey (you did do that, right?). You can copy those into one CSV (comma-separated value) file and import them into GMail.

[Here’s a tutorial on how to do that.](#)

Once you’ve imported your contacts, GMail will place them all in a Contact Group with a name such as “**Imported Contacts [today’s date]**.” I’d recommend renaming that to something more useful, like “**KS Backers.**”

If you need to exclude certain e-mail addresses, you can remove them from the group by hand or simply not include them in your CSV file to begin with. I recommend the latter. If you really need those contacts for another reason, you can create a separate Contact Group for those e-mail addresses specifically.

SEND YOUR E-MAIL USING BCC

Finally, now that you have your e-mail contacts and your file ready to go, you can create a new e-mail to send to everyone. GMail makes it easy to e-mail everyone in a single Group; simply type “KS Backers” (or whatever you named your group) into the **Bcc:** field of your e-mail window and it will import everyone’s contact information.

Important: Use **BCC**, not **To** or **CC** when sending bulk e-mails. It’s not polite to share everyone’s e-mail address. BCC stands for Blind Carbon Copy, where the Blind part means nobody will be able to see one another’s e-mail address.

Paste your Share link or attach your file to the e-mail and send it to your backers.

Note: Your e-mail *will* wind up in some peoples’ spam folders. Many e-mail clients will flag it as spam because you sent a BCC to 100 or so e-mail addresses. You’ll want to send a Backer Update through Kickstarter now to inform people that they should expect another e-mail from you and they should check their spam boxes if they didn’t receive it. If anyone contacts you saying they didn’t receive the e-mail, verify whether or not they were supposed to get it to begin with and send them the link on a case-by-case basis.

CREATE A SPECIAL DISCOUNT THROUGH ONE-BOOKSHELF

Before you get started sending out e-mails, pay attention to this. If you plan on selling through OBS at all, make sure you mention that to your backers in your initial e-mail. You’ll get a lot of questions from people asking whether or not they can get a free download through OBS if you don’t. I learned this the hard way and had to spend valuable time responding to peoples’ questions about it.

When a customer purchases a PDF from OBS, it is placed into their permanent download locker. They can always retrieve the file at a later time, and many people like that peace of mind. For the backers who already have an OBS account or don't mind setting one up, this is a huge benefit. It's free and simple to set up a free download link, and if you can send the link in your original e-mail to everyone then you'll avoid a lot of complication and follow-up e-mails.

GENERATE A FREE DOWNLOAD LINK USING OBS:

1. Log into your account at RPGNow.com or DriveThruRPG.com.
2. Click **Accounts** at the top of the screen.
3. Scroll down to your **Publisher Menu**.
4. Under the **Promotion** section, select **Create or edit special discounts**.

There are several drop-down menus and text fields on the page. Select your product and product options to choose which file you'd like to apply a special discount to. Then, under **Special Price** enter **0.00**. That's the price your customers will pay for the product using the link you're about to generate. YOU can create other promotions later by following these same steps and entering a different price.

The choices in this form are optional and I recommend leaving them blank. You can time-limit your special promotion if you'd like to limit the amount of time your backers have to download the file for free, but you may then need to send the file to individuals who didn't get around to downloading it in a

timely manner.

5. Click **Create Special Discount** to generate a new link. Your page will refresh and you'll have a new section entitled **Current Special Discounts**.

6. Copy your **Discount Link** and send it in the e-mail with your Google Drive link (or an additional e-mail if, like me, you just couldn't wait). The link looks something like this:

<http://www.rpgnow.com/index.php?discount=#####/>

WHAT'S NEXT?

You've now distributed your game to backers in two different ways: through Google Drive for anyone not using OneBookShelf and through OBS for those who do. Now it's time to promote and sell. OBS will handle all of your distribution from here out, unless of course you choose to host your files with other websites as well. [Shop d20pfsrd](#) is another great website for selling electronic books, and they're especially great if you're selling Pathfinder, Sword and Wizardry, or Mutans and Masterminds products.

CONCLUSION

There are many other ways you can distribute your files to backers, but the examples above are both free and easy. You could set up a file on a hosted server and set a password-protected download link, or you can upload to Dropbox or any number of other cloud storage sites. If you find something that works better for you, then by all means give it a try.

POST-KICKSTARTER FULFILLMENT

ORIGINAL POST

Rather than asking questions in this post I'm just speaking aloud as I work out some costs and expound on my own experience shipping from within the States. Shipping is one thing that I'm well versed in because I've spent the last decade slowly selling off the grotesquely large game collection I'd been building up for a long time, but over indulged during the rise of eurogames. I've shipped over 500 packages in that time.

I've shipped stuff all over the world and, indeed, shipping can get pretty expensive depending on what you ship and how big it is. Oversized packages really can be a nightmare with international shipping prices, but thankfully in the RPG world this isn't really an issue.

Fortunately for RPGs weight and bulk normally are not that big of an issue. I've always used the US Postal Service for shipping. The main reason being that you get their priority mail boxes, along with a lot of other packaging bits shipped to you for free and you can just have outgoing packages picked up right from your doorstep when the mailman comes by each day.

BOOK AND PACKAGING WEIGHT

In getting some projections on shipping costs for my Kickstarter I pulled a bunch of different RPG books off the shelf, weighed them and then figured out some of the more extreme shipping costs that I could encounter.

Typically one doesn't have both a soft and hard back version of an RPG book, but I happen to have both version of the D&D 3.5 Player's Handbook:

320 page softcover 1 pound, 14.8 ounces
320 page hardcover 2 pounds, 8.3 ounces

That's a 9.5 ounce difference in weight.

Average book weights:

60 page softcover 7 ounces

100 page softcover 12 ounces

140 page hardcover 1 pound, 4 ounces

320 page softcover 1 pound, 15 ounces

320 page hardcover 2 pounds, 8.3 ounces

The weight of a priority mail box is around 8 ounces for those that would comfortably fit an RPG book. Packaging, such as bubblewrap that is sufficient to enclose a book comes in at something below an ounce, but should simply be rounded up to an ounce.

DOMESTIC SHIPPING COSTS

I went to the USPS online shipping calculator and put in the weights to see what would come up. It should be noted that I have a USPS digital scale to ensure that my weights are accurate. Vermont fortunately is essentially on the east coast of the US so I was able to target places like California, Alaska, and Hawaii and know it was going as far within the US as is possible. When I plugged in zip codes for all three of these states I got back the same prices. The results were:

60 page softcover: Priority = \$6.20, Media Mail = \$2.47

100 page softcover: Priority = \$9.62, Media Mail = \$2.89

140 page hardcover: Priority = \$9.62, Media Mail = \$2.89

320 page softcover: Priority = \$12.82, Media Mail = \$3.31

320 page hardcover: Priority = \$15.46, Media Mail = \$3.73

Media mail is looking pretty good. We should consider ourselves lucky that RPGs are primarily a book based medium because boardgames or basically anything else would need to pay much higher prices to get anything shipped.

Media mail requires getting your own boxes, you can't use the free Priority Mail boxes. If you head over to U-Line you can get 100 mailers which would cost me

\$74.19 (\$54+\$20.19). That comes out to 74 cents per mailer.

One drawback to media mail is that you can't pay for it online. You have to go over to the post office and do it all manually. A real pain if you're trying to ship out scores of packages, but that's how it goes. With priority mail you can get it all done in your home online, pack it all up and then get the mailguy to pick it all up for you. Much more convenient, but you are tripling your shipping cost.

TO BUBBLE WRAP OR NOT

You can go cheap and not wrap your book. My preference over my decade of shipping on ebay is to properly protect everything I send out. The grief and hassle of dealing with someone unsatisfied with the condition of the item isn't worth it to me personally. Out of the hundreds of packages I've shipped, only once did someone complain about the condition they received the item and from the description of the package they received it sounds like something terribly wrong happened in transit. They thought I should have packed things even more, but from my vantage point it represented a 0.18% failure rate due to conditions beyond my control. To reduce that further would double the cost of packing material.

Bubble wrap isn't cheap, but it's cheaper than foam peanuts. Get the small bubbles and not the big ones. If you go into an office supply store like Staples you can get a roll of 175 feet for right around \$20 with taxes. Wrapping up a book is going to take 2 to 4 feet depending on the books thickness. So a roll will get you 43 to 86 books wrapped up. For wrapping you're spending 0.23 to 0.47 cents per book.

TAPE AND INK

Two other things you'll need to factor into the shipping cost is tape and inkjet costs. Inkjet needs to be considered because printing out 100 labels via online priority mail shipping, or just want a clean

label for media mail that you imported from the list of addressed you get from Kickstarter, then it'll be some chunk of those expensive ink cartridges. They are around \$30 each, so maybe \$10 of that will go to your labels. And by label I mean anything. I normally print out on regular paper and just tape it to the package, but you could go get some Avery labels that are formatted for specific sizes.

A place like Staples will sell lots of different varieties of tape. I just get their store brand in bulk for my ebay needs, but for a small crowdfunding project you'll likely only need two to three rolls. You want some kind of tape dispenser. Usually packing tape comes with a built in cutter, I happen to have a dedicated one and then mount tape rolls into it. I have to say, trying to tape up scores of packages with scissors will lead to your own unique insanity. It will take forever and you'll endlessly find the tape sticking to itself and pushing you to invent new creative ways to cuss and froth at the mouth. Here is a \$15 package deal.

Adding it all together

Say you have a successful crowdfunding project and need to ship off 80 softcover books to people within the US. A shipping cost breakdown might look something like:

Boxes \$75
Tape \$15
Bubblewrap \$20
Shipping (\$3x80) \$240
Paper + Ink \$20

Total is \$370. Now if this is so successful that you have to ship 80 books to people then you'll likely have brought in \$2000+, so it should not be a huge burden, perhaps being 20% of your funding.

International Shipping

Where domestic shipping just takes a reasonable chunk out of your funding, it's international shipping that could really hurt you unless you plan accordingly. For the US shippers the two main options are Priority Mail and International First Class

Mail. First Class will be cheaper, but often are much longer shipping times.

Here are the costs for the books I sampled if they were going to Germany from Vermont:

60 page softcover: Priority = \$30, First Class = \$11.60

100 page softcover: Priority = \$32.54, First Class = \$14.74

140 page hardcover: Priority = \$32.54, First Class = \$16.31

320 page softcover: Priority = \$36.58, First Class = \$21.02

320 page hardcover: Priority = \$40.61, First Class = \$25.73

First Class, right? Probably, but just like media mail in domestic shipping, you can only do First Class International shipping at the post office. The convenience factor is there, however regardless of Priority or First Class you have to go into the post office and interact with a clerk to get international packages off. You can't just have them picked up at your house.

In terms of price, do your homework and then price accordingly. Since you are likely eating the domestic charges for shipping (roughly \$5) just take whatever shipping cost your research gives you and deduct \$5 from it and you'll have what you need to charge international backers.

If you find that you need to send several books to one address, perhaps a retail store wants several copies, then look into the Flat Rate Priority Mail Boxes. This might end up saving you a lot of money as you can cram quite a lot of weight into a single box.

THE CUSTOMS MAN COMETH...

It's nearly inescapable, tedious and with stoic resignation you just need to take a deep breath and face it head on.

International shipping usually requires a customs form to be filled out. Rather than have anyone get mad at me, I'll just quote the website:

Quote:

"Generally, you'll need a customs form for all international mail except First-Class Mail International® items and Priority Mail International Flat Rate™ Envelopes that weigh less than 16 oz, are no more than 3/4" thick, and which contain only documents."

So you might be able to dodge this whole affair if you stuff a thin book into an envelope and send it off. I'm going off the assumption of better packaging and heavier books with this discussion.

With ebay they have integrated paypal and the US online shipping service to the point that a lot of the tedium is gone. You just print out the prefilled out forms, sign them and then stuff them in a special clear plastic pocket that displays the shipping details. However all of this has to be done manually with a crowdfunding project. You can get this paid for and printed out with the online postage service and so that can help reduce the amount of details you have to write onto the forms, but if you have a lot of customs forms to fill out you're just going to have to suck it up and grind through them.

Lastly, with customs forms, always physically write out your return address and the sendee's details on the box itself. The customs forms get pulled out of the pocket and get moved around and to avoid mistakes beyond your control just make sure that in the end someone can figure out where the box needs to go regardless of what happens to those forms.

CONCLUSIONS

If you aren't familiar with boxing up a lot of items and sending them off, it takes a sizable amount of time and expense. When I ship out batches of ebay items, amounting to 10-15 packages, it can take almost a full work day of time to get all of the niggly details worked out and moved out of the house and into the shipping stream. There is always some complication that comes up with an address, packaging, customer

issues, or you simply forgetting a key detail once you get to the post office. Having someone accompany you to the post office is a huge benefit because you're likely going to be standing in a long line, juggling lots of packages, needing to quickly fill out some last detail, and so on. Thus plan your time accordingly and see who might be able to help for a few hours.

If you plan to do as much work at home and online then buy a USPS digital scale, using some other scale (God forbid a bathroom scale) you're just opening yourself up to surprises and delays.

MY THOUGHTS

Wow, talk about thorough!

I love this breakdown, and it comes right from the mouth of a person who's done a lot of shipping. If you're going to fulfill your Kickstarter orders (or any other large number of RPG book shipments) this is some really great advice.

However, it's also slightly dated. Even a mere one year later, the landscape of shipping RPG products has changed dramatically. I discovered this while shipping my own books to Psi-punk backers. Here's what I've learned.

ONEBOOKSHELF IS YOUR FRIEND

If you're selling RPGs, chances are pretty high that you will already be preparing to sell PDFs through OneBookShelf. If you're not, you should be; they're the largest online retailer of RPGs and you'd be missing out on some huge sales opportunities if you don't use their services. The good news is that you can make your partnership with OBS a double win for you.

In addition to PDF sales, OBS handles Print on Demand. I've already discussed POD as an option, and I still feel strongly that their services are the best available for RPG publishers. My layout artist for Psi-punk wasn't pleased that their printer doesn't offer full bleeds for black and white books, but I found that to be of minor importance compared to their overall ease of use.

If you do decide to use OBS' print on demand services, you're in luck. As recently as May 2013, they began allowing publishers to add 100 unique addresses to their address books. To a Kickstarter-funded publisher, this means three important things:

1. You can ship *directly* to your backers without shipping to yourself first. There's no need to pay for shipping twice anymore. You do pay a \$1.50 transaction fee per order, but I used some Excel-fu and determined that, for the 54 unique addresses I had to ship to, this still cost me less in the end.

2. OBS uses a company called LightningSource to do their printing. LightningSource has printers in the US and the UK. Any order that ships to international destinations will be shipped from their UK facility, meaning you no longer have to pay \$30 to ship a book to Germany (I shipped a box of 8 books to a store in Germany for less than \$30).

3. Remember what Neil said about Customs? Because LightningSource does the fulfillment, they do all of the customs work for you. I didn't have to fill out a single Customs form and I shipped to about 12 international addresses.

It was somewhat tedious having to fill out each address by hand (they don't have a bulk address import option) but I found the benefits to *far* outweigh that minor time commitment. If you're using POD services through OBS, I highly encourage you to fulfill your orders through them as well.

Note: OneBookShelf also does print-on-demand card games now. If you're publishing a card game and not an RPG, you can take advantage of the same services.

The typical cost to ship from OBS via USPS MediaMail was \$4.49, plus the cost of the printed product (in my case, \$5.44 for the softcover and \$10.55 for the hardcover). International orders cost between \$5 and \$11 for softcover books, depending on where the books were going (I had some that went to Australia from the UK). That price includes the \$1.50 transaction fee.

MANUAL SHIPPING

Even though OBS helped me cut down on my fulfillment time, there were still a few books that I had to ship myself. These were the books that had to be personalized with signatures and those which had to be shipped with T-shirts. I had one giant batch of about 25 books sent directly to me. About a dozen of those books didn't get shipped out; 6 go to game stores here in Portland and a few others go to Portland locals, so they're being delivered by hand to cut down on costs.

Those books which I did have to personalize and ship were the ones which ultimately cost me the most per-unit. In addition to the initial cost to ship the books to me, I had to turn around and ship them to my backers. Unfortunately, since most of these books were bundled with T-shirts I couldn't use USPS Media Mail; they have strict policies regarding what can and cannot be shipped via Media Mail, and T-shirts are not on the list of valid products.

I shipped USPS First Class to addresses ranging from nearby Nevada to far-off Tennessee (relative to my location in Oregon) and that cost me \$6.40 to \$11.15 or so, depending on destination. Again, that's in addition to the cost to ship to me originally, so in total I paid about \$8 to \$14 to ship each of these products.

Luckily, my T-shirts cost me nothing to ship from the printer because the printer was my brother. It's all about who you know, right?

In retrospect, I'm not sure I would offer personalized physical products in the future. It doubled if not tripled my shipping costs for those specific items, and while the backers did pay significantly more for those things, it also added additional headache and hassle to get them shipped. I think in the future I would try to offer backer rewards that didn't include other physical goods, or at the very least I'd make sure the books themselves don't need to be personalized.

STAMPS.COM

One service I would like to highlight if you're going to be doing any personalized shipping is Stamps.com. If you're not shipping via OneBookShelf (for example, if you're using a traditional printer or shipping board games and other physical products) you can save yourself a lot of time by using Stamps.com. Note that I am not an affiliate of Stamps.com and I'm not getting any money for mentioning them.

Stamps.com is a subscription service with a base starting price of \$16/mo, but you get a 14-day free trial when you sign up. Take advantage of that free trial, because it's not worth the extra monthly cost if you're not going to be a regular shipper. They advertise a savings up to "Up to 80%" on postage, but in reality they wound up costing me something like \$0.18 more per product to ship. That was worth it to me, and the reasons are simple:

The Stamps.com software is quite powerful. It's not the most intuitive software to use and I even had to go to the Help dialogue a few times to figure out what I was supposed to do, but once I got the hang of it, the program saved me quite a bit of time. Even though I was only shipping about 7 packages by hand, I can see the benefits of using them. If you're shipping a large number of packages, even better.

The reason is that you can import all of the addresses from your Kickstarter backers with just a few steps (I'm not going to say easy steps, but a few steps nonetheless). KS lets you export your backer lists (including addresses) to an Excel spreadsheet, which you can then convert to a CSV (Comma-Separated Values) file. Stamps.com then imports your CSV file and voila, you have all of your backer addresses in one convenient place. (Bonus: you can import the same CSV file into your Google Contacts so you can bulk import e-mail addresses if you need to. Please exercise good judgment when sending bulk emails to backers through a service other than Kickstarter Backer Updates.)

At that point, you can choose to print postage for as many addresses you want in bulk. Provided you're shipping the same product weight to multiple people, which is pretty much a sure thing if you're shipping a large amount of books.

For example, you can enter the weight of your book, select Media Mail, and tell the program to print postage for all of your backers who are getting that specific book.

There is one issue: you have to pay for postage **before** you print. Basically, you have to load up your account with cash (which you can do from within the program using a credit or debit card) and then have the cost deducted from your account. It's a bit of a pain, but for the ease of printing I felt it was worthwhile.

How do you know how much your product weighs? Well, if you're printing through OneBookShelf they tell you. My 192-page softcover book was 1.01 pounds while my 192-page hardcover book was 1.64 pounds. I plugged those values into the Stamps.com software and it told me how much each would cost to ship and it gives you a convenient comparison between Media Mail, First Class, Priority, and Overnight. I noticed that just about any Media Mail product under 2 pounds costs about \$2.99 to ship anywhere in the country via Media Mail these days, but First Class and other shipping methods vary based on distance to the destination address.

If you're not printing through OneBookShelf, you may be able to get an estimate of weight from your printer. Otherwise, it's a pretty safe bet that you'll fall under that 2 pound weight range for Media Mail unless your book has a significantly high page count. At that point, it may be worth it to invest in a digital scale, or you can just enter 3 pounds or 4 pounds. The exact weight doesn't matter as long as you pay enough postage to satisfy the fine folks at the post office.

Finally, I should point out that Stamps.com does require a credit card to sign up and *does not* allow online cancellation of services, even within your trial window. Yep, they're content

to be in the dark ages and force you to call customer service to cancel your account. Yet another hassle, but yet another hassle I feel is worthwhile if you're going to be shipping a large number of books or other products.

FINAL TOTAL

My final total to both *print and ship* about 70 books was roughly \$1061 USD. That includes the cost of the book materials (the largest portion of the cost) and the shipping costs. Some of those books were bulk orders to a single address (one store ordered 8 books) and a few were local orders that I don't have to ship a second time. That was a larger percentage of my total Kickstarter budget than I anticipated, and I know I saved some money by shipping directly through OBS.

If you remember my Psi-punk [Post-Kickstarter Statistics](#) post, you may recall that I estimated between 15% and 20% of my total budget going toward shipping. That was between roughly \$700 and \$934. My final total was 23.78%, or \$1061 -- higher than my highest estimate. Thankfully I saved money on art by coming in below my budget, so ultimately I wound up not having to pay out of pocket to finish fulfillment. Also, I did order a few extra books to have on-hand for sale at conventions and to other locals, and I hadn't anticipated the two proof copies of the book I had to order for myself; that total was probably \$70 or so on its own.

When estimating your shipping costs, remember you need to order some books for yourself!

FINAL THOUGHTS

That concludes the **Game Publishing Lessons Learned** series. I hope you found some use out of it -- feedback has been great so far, but I always love to hear from you. If you enjoyed this post or this series of posts, please tell your friends and fellow game designers about it. Also, feel free to ask me any follow-up questions you may have. I love sharing this information with you and would not be opposed to doing a follow-up FAQ!

FINAL THOUGHTS

Game publishing is full of challenges, but it's also full of rewards. For all of my efforts, I published a unique new book that has enjoyed some degree of success. As my first fully-realized core rulebook, Psi-punk is something that I am incredibly proud of.

It couldn't have happened without all of the growing pains I talked about in this book. Hiring artists, choosing a layout method, marketing, launching a Kickstarter campaign, and fulfilling the orders for all my backers--these were all important steps on my way toward becoming a self-published game designer.

I have a passion for both creating new games and running a business. These are two key passions every self-published author must possess in order to succeed without the help of a traditional publishing firm. Not every designer has the desire to be a business person, but that's okay--there are plenty of ways to get help that don't require a lot of time or money.

If you're one of the many folks who just wants to design a brilliant new game but are a little intimidated by all of the challenges you've read throughout this book, don't fret. Just [send me an e-mail](#) and I'll be happy to walk you through whatever steps you're uncomfortable with.

You're also welcome to inquire about Kickstarter fulfillment services. If you've run a successful campaign but aren't sure what to do next, I can lend a hand there too. I'm always happy to help new publishers and game designers--after all, I was new to the whole thing very recently, too!

If you enjoyed this book and found it useful, please let me know. I would love to continue sharing my experiences with everyone, and every time I hear from someone who says they found my material useful I am inclined to write that much more.