

Campaign Board Games as a Steppingstone towards TRPGs: An Examination of a New Phenomenon in Tabletop Gaming

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Abstract

Campaign board games have emerged as a distinct and growing niche within the tabletop gaming space. These games, such as *Kingdom Death: Monster* and *Aeon Trespass: Odyssey*, incorporate long-form storytelling, character progression, and cooperative play, mirroring key aspects of traditional tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs) like *Dungeons & Dragons*. Despite structural similarities, campaign board games differ from TRPGs in their lack of a human game master, reliance on predefined branching narratives, and more rigid adherence to rules. This paper explores the intersection between campaign board games and TRPGs, highlighting both their shared characteristics – such as emergent narratives, player agency, and game mechanics – and where they diverge, including differences in roleplay/improvisation, mechanical flexibility, and replayability. A key argument of this paper is that campaign board games offer an approachable alternative to TRPGs, especially for newcomers. Unlike TRPGs, which typically require a skilled game master and a high level of improvisational ability, campaign board games provide a structured experience that allows players to engage with rich narratives and complex decision-making in a more accessible format. This structured design may serve as a bridge for those interested in transitioning into TRPGs by offering players an “out of the box” experience to help build familiarity with the genre. By examining the overlap between these games and TRPGs, this essay argues for their scholarly relevance within RPG studies and as tools or an alternative for TRPG enthusiasts.

Keywords: campaign board games, narrative, player experience, TRPG

要約

キャンペーン型ボードゲームは、卓上ゲーム領域において独自かつ拡大しつつあるニッチとして登場している。この種のゲームは、『Kingdom Death: Monster』や『Aeon Trespass: Odyssey』のように、長期的な物語展開、キャラクター成長、協力型プレイを組み込み、『Dungeons & Dragons』に代表される伝統的なテーブルトーク RPG (TRPG) の重要な要素を反映している。構造的な類似性にもかかわらず、キャンペーン型ボードゲームは、人的ゲームマスターを欠くこと、あらかじめ定められた分岐型物語への依存、そしてより厳密なルール運用といった点で TRPG と異なる。本稿は、キャンペーン型ボードゲームと TRPG の交差領域を検討し、生成的物語やプレイヤーの主体性、ゲームメカニクスといった共通点と、ロールプレイ/即興性、メカニクスの柔軟性、リプレイ性の差異とを明らかにするものである。本稿の主要な論点は、キャンペーン型ボードゲームが、特に初心者にとって TRPG への取り組みやすい代替手段を提供するという点にある。多くの TRPG が熟練したゲームマスターや高度な即興能力を必要とするのに対し、キャンペーン型ボードゲームは構造化された体験を提供し、プレイヤーが豊かな物語や複雑な意思決定によりアクセスしやすい形式で関与できる。この構造化された設計は、ジャンルへの理解を深める「箱から出してすぐに遊べる」経験を提供することで、TRPG への移行を志向する者にとって橋渡しとなりうる。これらのゲームと TRPG の重なりを検討することにより、本稿は、キャンペーン型ボードゲームが RPG 研究において学術的意義を有するとともに、TRPG 愛好者にとってのツール、あるいは代替形態として位置づけられるべきであると論じる。

キーワード: キャンペーン型ボードゲーム、物語、プレイヤー経験、TRPG

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1. Introduction

Big-box, narrative board games – also frequently called *campaign board games* in board game circles¹ – are a relatively recent phenomenon within the world of tabletop gaming. These games are typically cooperative and ask players to control a character or group of characters who inhabit and navigate through a long-form narrative campaign in a fictional world. To progress through these games, players must work together, using their characters' skills, abilities, and equipment to confront and overcome the challenges that the game throws at them. Furthermore, unlike many board games, campaign board games cannot be completed in one sitting, and require multiple sessions, each of which progresses the campaign one tick further towards the end. Examples of games in this category include, but are not limited to, *Kingdom Death: Monster* (Poots 2015), *Gloomhaven* (Childres 2017), *Middara: Unintentional Malum - Act 1* (Helme et al. 2019), *Oathsworn: Into the Deepwood* (Jolly 2022), and *Aeon Trespass: Odyssey* (Wełnicki, Marcin 2022). It is worth noting that all of the games mentioned here were brought to life through crowdfunding via websites such as Kickstarter and Gamefound. Small, start-up game designers like the above often have trouble selling their ideas to large publishers due to both the scope of the games (i.e., large up-front manufacturing costs for miniatures) and not having an established customer base. One of the larger players in this space is a company like Awaken Realms, which has made six different campaign board games, as of this writing. According to their home page,² they have collected “over \$40,000,000” since 2015, but this is still a very small figure compared to giants such as Wizards of the Coast, which made more than \$1 billion (USD) in revenue for *Magic: The Gathering* (Garfield 1993) alone in 2024, according to Hasbro's 4th quarter 2024 earnings report (2025). However, the fact that a game like *Kingdom Death: Monster* – not backed by any major publishers – could gross more than \$2 million (USD) directly from Kickstarter backers during the designer's first-ever crowdfunding campaign does indicate that there is an appetite among tabletop gamers for campaign board games, albeit not yet perhaps at the scale that larger publishers would like to see before designing their own.

Some of the keywords in the previous paragraph, such as *campaign*, *character*, and *narrative*, may remind one of Tabletop Roleplaying Games (TRPGs). The central claim of this paper is that there is an insightful overlap between the aforementioned campaign board games and traditional TRPGs, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974), which makes them worth paying attention to for TRPG scholars, enthusiasts, and newcomers to the genre alike. Naturally, there are also ways in which they diverge, and it is not my claim that they are all the same. Indeed, campaign board games represent an emerging niche in the tabletop gaming space and have the potential to afford a TRPG-like experience. They also have the potential to act as a gateway tool for working towards participating in the more nuanced gameplay of a traditional TRPG, which can be uniquely challenging for novices. However, these games do tend to be expensive, with even the base games commanding prices ranging from \$149 (USD) for *Oathsworn: Into the Deepwood*, \$250 for *Middara: Unintentional Malum - Act 1*, and \$400 for *Kingdom Death: Monster* (KD:M). The more expensive games tend to be those that include large, complex, highly-detailed miniatures, as is the case in *KD:M*, while the cheaper ones may opt for cardboard standees instead. Despite this cost, I argue that while campaign board games do not fully replicate the open-ended experience of TRPGs, their structured mechanics make them a valuable bridge for new players and a unique subject of study within TRPG scholarship.

This paper will begin by examining where campaign games and TRPGs intersect, where they differ, and end with a discussion of why these games are ripe for further inquiry in the RPG space.

2. Structural Overlap with TRPGs

To find the overlap between TRPGs and campaign board games, it is important to visit a definition of what a TRPG is. Jennifer Grouling Cover offers one that includes narrative experience:

¹ <https://boardgamegeek.com/geeklist/270852/massive-campaign-co-op-games> (accessed 2025/9/30)

² <https://awakenrealms.com/> (accessed 2025/9/30)

A game/game system that involves collaboration between a small group of players and a gamemaster through face-to-face social activity with the purpose of creating a narrative experience (Grouling Cover 2010, 168).

Both TRPGs and campaign board games involve storytelling, world-building, and emergent narratives. In a TRPG like D&D, a game master (GM) – the game's facilitator and judge – and the players are collaboratively telling a story within a fictional world and moving the narrative forward in an ergodic, emergent way; that is, the narrative emerges from the interaction between the GM's scene setting and the players' choices, all mediated by a set of rules that adjudicate how conflict is resolved.³ The setting and impetus for the plot could be the GM's original creation (so-called *homebrew*), or the GM could run a pre-written *adventure module* [e.g., *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist*; Perkins et al. (2018)]. Campaign board games like *Aeon Trespas: Odyssey (AT:O)* invite players to take part in an ancient Greece-inspired, pre-constructed narrative similar to a TRPG adventure module. Instead of the narrative being co-constructed by the GM and players, it is **discovered** by making choices through a wholly analog, gamebook-like experience, or digitally augmented with an app. *AT:O*, for instance, has both a book for each cycle (chapter) of the story, and an optional app which includes music and professional narration to help immerse players in the story.

Campaign board games also bear similarities to gamebooks such as *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*, first of the *Fighting Fantasy* series (Jackson and Livingstone 1982), or Joe Dever's *Lone Wolf* series, beginning with *Flight from the Dark* (Dever 1984). In fact, it has been suggested by industry experts that these very gamebooks were intended to "capture the fun of *Dungeons and Dragons* in book form" (Kondō 2023, 9e), and thus also have overlap with TRPGs. Arnaudo (2023) makes a strong case that part of the allure of gamebooks for enjoying a narrative lies in their materiality, which grants them affordances unique to the medium. To illustrate, Arnaudo describes gamebooks as "sensory experiences that create a strong bond with the artifact" (ibid, 23). Moreover, the ability to experience one path through the story and then physically jump back in the book to a previous section to try a different one, allows a reader to experience multiple possible narrative outcomes. Just as gamebooks are a potential gateway medium to TRPGs, campaign board games possess similar potential, only they are multiple times more immersive due to their own materiality. The major difference between them lies in the sheer volume of materials that campaign board games are composed of (e.g., a board, decks of cards, miniatures/standees, tokens, reference and record sheets, etc.). In contrast, a gamebook is only the book, and perhaps some dice and a pencil, which need to be supplied by the reader from elsewhere. In addition to a main story/campaign book with numbered sections, campaign board games like those mentioned thus far contain hundreds of cards bedecked with evocative artwork and flavor text, dozens of miniatures that yearn to be painted and put on display, thematic location tiles and game boards where legendary battles are fought, and a plethora of other realia to pull players into the world and create the TRPG-adjacent gameplay experience.

To illustrate the experience of playing a campaign board game, early on in *AT:O*, players are in charge of a vast, city-sized ship called the *Argo*. Soon, they are confronted with the choice of whether or not to allow a Minoan princess with unclear motives onto the ship as a passenger. Having her aboard could provide the group with valuable political capital, but as an important personage, she could also become a liability. These narrative choices usually have lasting effects on the story, just as in a TRPG, and cause the overall narrative to emerge from the interplay between the players' choices in the game and the rules surrounding conflict resolution.

The choices that players make having a noticeable effect is also a hallmark of both TRPGs and campaign board games. The strongest overlap lies in mechanical agency, which refers to how much freedom players have in using the game mechanics to solve in-game challenges and resolve conflicts. TRPG systems typically afford players a vast array of options for building a character, such as selecting skills, traits, magic spells, equipment, and other features. Campaign board games offer the same type of

³ This is in stark contrast to other narrative texts, such as a novel, film, or comic, in which the narrative – while it may "interact" with the audience by offering food for thought – is nevertheless static. Game narratives, such as those produced by *D&D*, have been described as "ergodic" (Aarseth 1997), requiring significant effort on the part of participants to not only produce the narrative, but move it forward (see Hilton 2023).

agency. One example comes from *Kingdom Death: Monster (KD:M)*, in which players control a handful of primitive human *survivors* who inhabit a dark, fallen world in which they are at the bottom of the food chain. To survive, they must go on *hunts* against horrific monsters and defeat them in mortal combat. If they somehow survive, they bring the spoils of war (monster skins, talons, etc.) back to their *settlement* and spend them to craft new gear, build structures, and attempt to create a society in the darkness. The mechanical agency in this game comes during all of these steps with questions such as: which gear will the players choose to craft, what will they bring along with them on the next hunt, which characters will depart on the hunt, and which will stay behind? Will some of the characters get married and start a family (assuming the settlement has developed these concepts by choosing the requisite development path(s)), and even deeper questions such as how the settlement will raise its children – will it expose them to danger early, in the hopes of hardening them, or will it be protective of them and attempt to shield them from the horrible reality that lurks beyond the settlement's comforting light? These decisions, when translated into game mechanics, provide the players with the toolset they will use to attempt to overcome the game's challenges, just as in a TRPG.

Another similarity between TRPGs and campaign board games lies in the fact that players' characters experience growth and progression not only in the form of narrative beats, but also mechanically in terms of their leveling up and gaining new powers, abilities, and skills. Like TRPGs, campaign board games are cooperative experiences in which the players have options to build their characters up to better face increasingly complex challenges in the game world. This is made even more apparent in games like *AT:O* or *KD:M* where the players must control not only their individual character(s), but also manage a collective unit. In *AT:O*, this is the Argo, while in *KD:M* it is the settlement. Like characters in a TRPG, both the Argo and the settlement are dynamic and grow throughout the game. For the Argo, players choose new technologies, build beneficial structures, discover secret compartments on the ship, and construct useful gear to equip their characters for combat. Similarly, in *KD:M*, players must discuss what options they have for developing their fledgling society and make decisions to meet the needs of their survivors and confront ever greater threats. While these discussions are likely not in-character as they might be in a TRPG, they are nevertheless decisions made about the game world through player interaction in both cases. In both campaign board games and TRPGs, the objects that players control (e.g., a character, *KD:M*'s settlement, etc.) are not static, but change over time and increase in mechanical depth and nuance.

On a more basic level, campaign board games and TRPGs also share core mechanical elements such as dice rolling and conflict resolution. For instance, the strength of a character's attack, the effectiveness of their haggling over prices in a market, what a treasure chest contains, or the destination of an enemy's movement are often determined by dice rolling, card draws, or some combination of the two. Of course, due to a TRPG having a GM, mechanics such as these can be modified or even eschewed outright if the GM deems it appropriate.⁴ Indeed, the presence of a GM is perhaps the largest difference between TRPGs and campaign board games and leads to the next section on divergences between the two genres.

3. Divergences from TRPGs

One of the most marked differences between a TRPG and a campaign board game lies in the fact that there is no GM. In a TRPG, players and a GM co-construct the narrative through roleplaying and interaction with key choices advertised by the GM and clever use of character abilities. In campaign board games, the choices are given by the game itself, usually in the form of rolling dice on random tables/charts, drawing cards from a deck, and branching narratives akin to a gamebook. To put it

⁴ This often occurs in groups that want to emphasize roleplaying and storytelling instead of letting die rolls dictate all of the outcomes. As an example, if during roleplay, a player is able to verbalize a particularly compelling argument for talking past a stubborn gate guard, the GM might allow them to "pass" without requiring a die roll to make a diplomacy check. By the same token, if a player's character had an extremely low charisma score, the GM might deem a player's strong argument to be outside their character's ability to articulate and force them to make a roll.

differently, a campaign board game has a simulated – rather than human – GM. This could be wholly analog, with narrative text intended to be read aloud and dice/card mechanics used for generating or selecting content, or it could be digitally augmented using an app, such as the one described earlier for *AT:O*.

Another difference is the varied degree of mechanical freedom. Campaign board games are more rigid with rules and therefore have much more defined realms of possibility. For instance, if *KD:M* were a TRPG, a player could declare they would like to attempt skill checks to tame or train one of the monsters and bring it back to the settlement alive. However, because this mechanic is not explicitly written in the rules, it is simply impossible, as campaign board games enforce strict boundaries. TRPGs are much more flexible and allow for players to bend the system in interesting ways, but this can lead to disagreements between participants, particularly if the GM's interpretation of the game world is different than a player's. Such a difference in opinion may lead to the failure or demise of a player's character (Bowman 2010, 71).

One other interesting divergence is the concept of replayability – whether or not a game can be revisited with the same group of people. TRPGs allow theoretically endless variation via player and GM improvisation and creativity, and therefore, replayability is not generally a concern. For many campaign board games, on the other hand, reliance on a branching narrative creates a game with more limited outcomes. For *AT:O*, there are many short stories (see *side quests*) along with one main story, which all have different outcomes depending on players' choices, successes, and failures. Not all of the stories can be experienced in one playthrough due to several in-game mechanics, such as paths not chosen being closed off.⁵ In *KD:M*, the replayability comes in the types of monsters players decide to include at the beginning of the campaign and the randomness with which content in the game is experienced (e.g., random events that may occur during a hunt). In both of these games, while the randomness and branching narratives simulate the experience of a TRPG and attempt to mitigate the issue of replayability, the narrative is finite and will dry up given enough plays.

4. What Makes Campaign Board Games Approachable?

One goal of this paper is to explain why campaign board games like those described throughout offer a compelling alternative, yet similar and approachable experience for TRPG novices. Despite not being an exact replica of a TRPG experience, these board games have arguably lower barriers to entry in some respects.

First of all, no GM is required for a campaign board game, and this is an enormous barrier to entry for a TRPG. Tychsen et al. (2005) outline the functions that a GM in a TRPG fulfills, which include managing the narrative, rules, player engagement, and the game setting. Dashiell (2022) argues further that many of these responsibilities – such as time management and conflict resolution – are implicit in the act of GMing and explains how issues such as inter-personal conflict can often arise when a GM is deficient in said responsibilities. For a GM to run a satisfying TRPG campaign, they typically are gifted at storytelling, know the rules of the game fully, understand narrative pacing, and are aware of and able to expertly manage group dynamics to afford each player opportunities to shine. Even since the earliest days of the hobby, these facets of good GMing have been detailed extensively in Gary Alan Fine's (1983) groundbreaking ethnography of *Dungeons & Dragons* groups. It is difficult to find a good GM for a TRPG because not just anyone can fill the role well. In fact, Fine found that talented GMs were afforded high status in their gaming groups, while less-skilled ones were pushed to the side (1983, 154-155). Moreover, Dashiell (2022, 10) notes that the actions inherent in GMing are “consistent with those affirmed in leadership,” a point echoed in Reed's interview with a GM (2024), which emphasizes that GMing is not a simple enterprise. It carries a “responsibility of making other people have fun” (ibid, 119) – a careful navigation of interpersonal dynamics – in addition to managing the ludic space.

⁵ One cannot simultaneously invite the Minoan princess onto the *Argo* and refuse her in the same playthrough; one would need to replay the game to discover what would happen on the alternate path. Of course, players could simply “cheat” as is common in gamebooks, and experience multiple narratives in tandem, just as the gamebook medium allows (Arnaudo 2023).

On the other hand, a campaign board game's interactive storybook, content generation systems (e.g., monster "AI decks" in *KD:M* dictate what an enemy will do on their turn), maps, and other realia such as miniatures are what create the TRPG-like atmosphere. One could perhaps make the claim that these games do have a GM: the game designer. However, the key difference from the player point of view is that the designer does not need to be present at the game table in order to evoke the intended experience.

A campaign board game's more defined mechanics and focus on rules-based gameplay leads to a streamlined experience. To play a TRPG, learning the system's rules is also required, and depending on the game in question, can be extremely complex, with many of the rules only coming into play in very specific circumstances. This is not to say that a campaign board game's rules are easier to learn than a TRPG's – indeed, they can be more or less difficult, depending on the games in question. However, due to many TRPG's focus being on roleplaying and the GM's ability to modify the rules, it is often unclear to what extent, which order, and which rules need to be learned by newcomers. Campaign board games, such as *KD:M* and *AT:O*, on the other hand, both contain tutorials that involve the players in the game, teach the basics, and ask them to make critical decisions from the moment they open the box and begin playing. As the games progress, more complex rules are gradually introduced in a scaffolded manner, building on previous knowledge.

One potential limitation of a TRPG campaign is the time it takes to play it. Of course, the time commitment for a TRPG campaign is dependent on shared group expectations and can vary from a few evenings of sessions to several years or even longer.⁶ The length of a single TRPG session within a campaign is just as varied. While reaching the conclusion of a campaign board game can also require many sessions of play, campaign board games often have clearer, segmented playtime with gameplay divided into phases outlined in the rulebook. For example, each chapter of *Oathsworn: Into the Deepwood* has a *story step* followed by an *encounter step*, and players know about how much time a step will take before beginning it, offering natural, narratively satisfying points to put the game on hold. Naturally, this is also possible to accomplish as a skilled GM in a TRPG, but it is arguably more difficult to control narrative pacing given the impromptu nature of a typical TRPG session.

Perhaps most crucially, there is also less reliance on roleplay/improvisation or player-led storytelling in campaign board games, meaning RPG novices can take part more easily. While TRPG campaign settings such as *The Forgotten Realms* (Greenwood, Grubb, and Boomgarden 1987) or pre-written adventure modules offer tools to help GMs run games, GMs and players alike are still largely left to their prior experience with the genre, the resulting experience of which, for better or worse, can be extremely varied. Campaign board games demand less genre awareness and roleplaying ability from participants at the outset, and therefore make them much more accessible, "out of the box" experiences.

5. Conclusion and Further Directions

Largely, this paper has described similarities and differences between campaign games and TRPGs that are structural in nature – mechanics, player agency, narrative elements, and who or what controls them. While these are important to point out, Cover calls on scholars and designers to focus on experiences: "Rather than asking if a certain text is a narrative, we might shift the question to ask if a certain text offers the audience a narrative experience" (Grouling Cover 2010, 175).

However, narratives on their own are not always compelling or hold audience interest. Therefore, it may also be important to determine whether or not a game – whether it is a TRPG or a campaign board game – is providing a narrative experience that players want to keep coming back to. Whether or not this is true in a TRPG depends much more heavily on the players and GM, while a campaign board game would seem to skew more towards the ability of the game designer and the quality of the writing in the game.

⁶ My longest-running *D&D* campaign to date lasted just over five years.

In the case of *AT:O*, the lead designer has made a serious attempt to keep the player experience at the heart of the game design:

The creative process here often begins with a vision of what players should feel when they engage with a game. Whether it's the tension of a battle/clash, the thrill of outsmarting a difficult mechanic, or the awe of discovering a profound plot twist, it all starts with figuring out how to make the player experience it all (Wełnicki 2024).

In closing, campaign board games offer a compelling, “out of the box” experience for novices to the RPG genre. Furthermore, for people interested in exploring TRPGs for the first time, campaign board games’ overlap with TRPGs may help them act as a bridge towards the more demanding skill set required for full participation in a TRPG, and are therefore worth scholarly attention. An exploration of their usefulness as preparation tools for a more open-ended TRPG experience would be welcome. By studying campaign board games, scholars may also be able to gain more specific insights into how the structured nature of the rules and narrative influence player engagement, storytelling, and how these game experiences differ from that of TRPGs. Further inquiries into the limitations and affordances of this new and nascent gaming niche are highly desirable.

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