These moments are familiar to me: You’re at your computer, tip-tapping along, in the midst of some florid or arcane narration, the mental machinery tick-tocking nicely, when all of a sudden, your brain snag on a the edges of a word. You root around for it, but there’s nothing but a hole there now. You can feel it quite clearly, the shape of its absence. You can work your fingers along its edges, probe the cavity of it with your tongue, but it remains stubbornly unattainable. You know the thing’s taxonomy, its genus; you can pace out its syllables, plumb its orthography, try to catch the echo of its vowels. Of course, along its crumbling borderline, the threat of slippage is indisputable, so your surveyor’s work is imprecise; you can only guesstimate. You might convince yourself it started with a \( b \) only to discover that you’d been deceived, that it was a \( d \) you were picturing, and not even in the first syllable. The thesaurus once more proves its ineptitude; you’re not sure why you keep returning to it, as though it might have changed since the last time. No, you’re on your own for this one. If you were intelligent, you’d lump something temporary in its place, a lexical sandbag to forestall the collapse you know is coming—you can feel the groaning of the beams—but you’re too dumb, or too stubborn, and so you keep clutching at that void, hoping that the sentence holds its shape until you’ve found whatever it is you’re searching for. Sometimes it does. Lately, it doesn’t.

Or it’s Thanksgiving dinner, and you’re relating an anecdote, and things are going fairly well (or, at least, okay by your standards), until you hit that snag. The machinery halts, and as you stammer your way back to the point, your cousin asks, more savagely than is strictly necessary, “Aren’t you supposed to be a writer?”
Or you’re talking to your doctor or your spouse or therapist, and you know there’s something important that you have to say, something that you need their help with, and damned if you know what it is.

These moments are familiar to me. Increasingly so.

I have a complicated relationship with words. My memory’s a little bit too porous—broad, but porous. I’m sure it isn’t uncommon among writers. At the same time, I’m not sure it’s common. Each sentence is a little agony. This has its advantages, believe it or not, but I’d still give damn near anything for a little less porosity. I’d be unstoppable.

So I know what it is to torment over a word. I know how it is when one word might as well be an entire page.

Paige Turner knows that writing is hard work.

I can, therefore, empathize with Paige Turner, the author protagonist of Tim Fowers’ word-building card game, *Paperback*. Paige is an aspiring novelist. She doesn’t seem to care what she’s writing—westerns, romance, thriller, science fiction. But she does, apparently, get paid by the word. Words are very important to Paige Turner; a single one could make or break an entire book.
Paperback is a word game, which means it’s mostly a game about putting letters together to make words and score points. Writers, I’m guessing, have a complicated relationship to word games like Scrabble. I know I do, my biggest complaint being that the game rarely rewards or reinforces a functional vocabulary or even an organically expansive one. Instead, it rewards and reinforces a Scrabble vocabulary: extensive knowledge of the Scrabble dictionary—those obscure 2-letter words, alternate spellings that you’d never encounter in the wild, and which foreign words and proper nouns don’t “count” as foreign words or proper nouns—is the key to victory, leading to a metagame that, to me, is more than a little broken.

But don’t be fooled: Paperback is not just a retelling of Scrabble. If you love Scrabble, you will probably love Paperback. But if you’re disenchanted with the word game behemoth, if you’re convinced that word games aren’t your “thing,” you just might love Paperback, too. This is a word game that people who love word games can enjoy with people who don’t.

Like other deckbuilding games, Paperback offers piles of cards to purchase. Paperback achieves this magical outcome by mixing traditional word-building with deckbuilding. Deckbuilding is, to me, the most significant game design innovation of the past decade. (The granddaddy of deckbuilding, Dominion, is actually about 11 years old this year, but I’ll allow it.) It’s also my
personal favorite mechanic; I’ve rarely encountered a deckbuilding game I didn’t thoroughly enjoy. I’ve written extensively about the allure of deckbuilding in my reviews of *Friday*, *Legendary Encounters*, *Copycat*, and *Dream Quest*, among others. Here’s the lowdown for the uninitiated:

A deckbuilding game is one in which a player begins with a small deck of simple cards, which is then enhanced or altered by new cards acquired over the course of the game. New cards are added permanently to the players deck—in most deckbuilding games, including *Paperback*, they’re put directly in the discard pile, so that each time the deck is reshuffled, the new batch of cards gets integrated with the old. Deckbuilding injects a player-driven dramatic arc and organic sense of progression into the game, as each player’s deck becomes stronger and more specialized with each passing turn. This sense of growth is innately satisfying and is similar in many ways to the power progression of a (tabletop or electronic) roleplaying game or Metroidvania title.

The Fame cards, which cast Paige Turner in the leading role, are full of cute references to popular novels.

The way this works in *Paperback* is that players begin with a 10-card deck comprising basic letters (T, R, S, L, and N) and Fame cards. On your turn, you try to form a single word using cards from your five-card hand. Like any
working writer, you get paid by the character: the basic letters listed above, for example, net you 1 cent each. Fame cards are wild, but the tradeoff is that you don’t earn any money for using them; they exist solely to expand your word-building options. Gone are the days of crwths and brrr, those vowelless abominations of the Scrabble dictionary. You can also use the currently available “Common Card,” which are primarily vowels, once when building your word. After adding up the total value of the word, you’ll spend your hard-earned pennies to purchase new, more exciting letters to enhance your deck in future rounds. You also get rewarded for the length of your word, potentially earning the topmost Common Card (and exposing a new one), and some variant rules grant you a bonus if your word matches a predetermined genre. This is a game for people who’d rather spell innocuously than gi.

The wild cards, those Fame cards, are a game-changer. While they might appear similar on paper, there’s a significant perceptive distinction between unscrambling a rack of Scrabble tiles—a task that, 99% of the time, a computer could perform more efficiently than a human—and puzzling over a word in Paperback, where your hand might contain a Q, a G, the letter pairs IN and ON, another I from the Common Card, and three wilds. Fold in special abilities—such as the common cards Spacebar, which allows you to form two words rather than one, or Dyslexia, which lets you swap the letters on one of your two-letter cards—and the possibility space opens up to the horizon. It evokes that moment of snag, that probing of a word’s absence, except that this is a happy torment, a liberation, an opening up of the word’s boundaries. It allows one to outsmart one’s anomia.
Theme cards and other variants make Paperback a mutable experience.

But where Paperback truly fascinates is in the way it manages, by combining the word-building and deckbuilding genres, to transform both. Each card is defined by three properties: the letter it represents, its cent value, and (on many cards) a special ability. Look only at the first two properties, and it might as well be a Scrabble tile; at the last two, and this could be any of dozens of Dominion-inspired deckbuilders. But combine all three, and something unexpected happens. There are cards that provide extra draws if you use them to start or end a word; cards that can turn an adjacent letter wild, copy its ability, or double its score; and cards that reward you for building short words, long words, words with lots of wilds, or words with no wilds at all. Suddenly, the calculus shifts, both when playing and when buying cards. How many four-letter J words do you really think you’ll be able to make? How can you squeeze that score-doubling M next to the ability-duplicating K? Are you going to go after the two-letter cards in the hopes of building longer words or the single letters for more flexibility?
The box is cleverly designed to look perfect on your bookshelf.

Those two-letter cards are a fascinating design choice all by themselves. It’s easy to imagine, when purchasing one, plenty of words that contain ER, IT, or NT in conjunction. But what happens when you draw ER, IT, and NT in a single hand Deckbuilding games are often about building combos of special abilities, but Paperback forces you to think not just of the abilities in isolation. You must balance the acquisition of high-scoring letters with powerful abilities against maintaining a functional deck—it’s no use if you buy a bunch of big-ticket letters that just don’t go together. The fact that Paperback gives you complete control over which letters you might draw is a revelation in itself, as is the fact that you’ll continue to see those letters, over and over again, as your deck evolves. In the first round, you might form the word tight and pick up that ER card so that, on round five, you can make tighter. On round eleven, this might have turned into tightening. Or, depending on the shifting Common Card and the synergies you’ve build in your deck, it might not.

Victory comes from buying additional Fame cards—which, remember, count as wilds but do nothing for your spending ability. In a charming move by illustrator Ryan Goldsberry, each of these Fame cards depicts the cover of a different novel by Paige Turner—and in all of them, Paige herself inhabits the role of heroine. As the blurb on the back cover explains,
Paige is determined to make it as a novelist. She’ll have to work her way up, writing everything from mystery to romance to make it on the best-seller list. Paige loves the stories she writes about and secretly wishes she could live them.

There are variant rules in the box to play cooperatively, give each player special powers, or provide end-game rewards for collecting certain types of cards or building certain genres of words. The 2018 expansion, Paperback [UNABRIDGED], adds new starting and Fame cards, lowercase letters, typos, asterisks, and more, so there’s little chance of the experience staling anytime soon. There’s also a 2018 sequel—or, rather, a “Pre-Quill”—Hardback, that follows the exploits of Paige’s great-grandmother, Penelope Quill. And, if you’re more of a Words with Friends person than a Scrabble person, you can find both Paperback and Hardback on the iOS app store.

The cooperative variant has players race to purchase a pyramid of ever-more-expensive Fame cards.

Following shortly on the heels of this review, I’ll be posting a new entry in my Ludic Writing series, in which I build a short story from the words played during a game of Paperback. This is my preferred way to play word games; it’s nice not to have to worry, for once, about finding the right word.