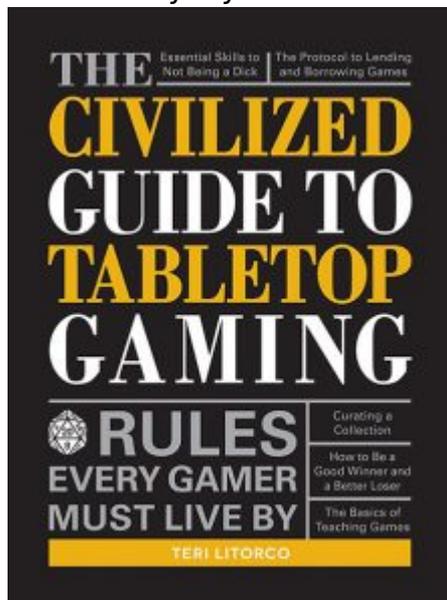


[The Civilized Guide to Tabletop Gaming](#) [by Teri Litorco](#)

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | November 17, 2016



The Civilized Guide to Tabletop Gaming by Teri Litorco

Adams Media, 2016

[Amazon](#) | [Adams Media](#)

I'll be frank: for the first few sections, I didn't much care for Teri Litorco's *Civilized Guide to Tabletop Gaming*. I started taking notes a few chapters in and had to stop myself when I realized I was just ranting. I didn't have anything nice to say, so I followed Thumper's advice and kept my yap shut. I think the author would have approved: this is a book about living out Wil Wheaton's famed mantra, "Don't be a dick."

By the end of the final section, though, the book had redeemed itself. That's when I realized that the first few chapters of the book weren't written for *me*. No, that's not quite accurate. I'd known that already; it was the subject of the lion's share of ranting. My epiphany, more accurately, was that the first few chapters were written for *another* me, me earlier on in my timeline of tabletop gaming discovery. Like the dick at gaming conventions who notices that the demo-er is leaving out some of the more nuanced rules (so as not to overwhelm the already sensorially overloaded demo-ees) and perceives that as *doing it wrong*, I needed to shut up and let the rules explainer do her thing.

The author and I are both what she'd term "hobby champions"; I know her via online retailer Miniature Market, where we're both part of the stable of paid reviewers. She's also a wargame vlogger associated with the [Geek & Sundry](#) network (home of Wil Wheaton's *Tabletop*, Felicia Day's *The Guild* and Matthew Mercer's *Critical Role*) and a podcaster with the Board Dames podcast. So it makes a kind of sense that she write a book exploring and explaining Wheaton's Law...and not get the pants sued off of her. In this book, Litorco

outlines how to participate in every facet of the tabletop gaming hobby, from buying games to attending conventions to learning to GM a roleplaying game, without turning into an unintentional (we hope) douchebag.

Here's how she describes it:

I'll say it plainly: Sometimes as gamers we turn into monsters. If everyone around the table turns into the same kind of monster when playing a game, the game is fun—everyone is playing with the same intent, expectation, and intensity. It's when there's a discrepancy in that intent, expectation, and intensity around the table that things go sour.

It's too bad I don't get to use my rant, which was all about how bullshit it is that we have yet another book catering to the casual audience *Tabletop* helped build and tooting the horns of the same five games (all conveniently available for purchase at your local Target), but the truth of the matter is that this book is a gamer's coat of many colors. Its various chapters are intended to be there when you need them, and they won't necessarily resonate if you read them at the wrong stage in your gaming journey. This is a book that's built to last, to grow alongside the reader. It's a handbook and should be approached as such.

I'll let it slide, then, that Litorco's chapters on the FLGS, or Friendly Local Game Store, have a utopian ring to them. If you live within close proximity to such a place, where there "is no weird 'tell us how we did' suggestion box, where feedback goes into the ether. Rather, there's a real human who will take your suggestions into consideration," places that provide "a great atmosphere to play games [and] a resource for solid game advice," please do follow the author's advice and "pay where you play." I'll continue shopping online and playing from home.

I'll also let it slide that Litorco's breakdown of popular game mechanics isn't exactly comprehensive (the author lists, seemingly at random, Deck Building, Luck, Bluffing, Cooperation, Worker Placement, Storytelling, Elimination, and Player Judging; BoardGameGeek recognizes an [equally arbitrary list](#) of 51 unique mechanics). Truly doing what Litorco suggests—coming to "know yourself" and your game group and curating your game collection to your collective tastes—can only be accomplished through occasionally painful trial and error. My favored mechanics—Press-Your-Luck, Real-Time, Solitaire Play, Deckbuilding (of a different sort than Litorco describes), Multi-Use Cards, and a few others that can't be encapsulated in a three-word phrase—are mostly absent from her list (and from BGG's). But for a novice gamer who's maybe seen a few episodes of *Tabletop* and played a hand or two of *Munchkin*, Litorco provides a place to start. She recognizes their needs, probably better than I do.

Beyond these early chapters, Litorco provides a pretty solid list of gaming ground rules (at one point she refers to the book as an etiquette guide for gamers). Here's one that took me too long to learn on my own: "When rules

conflict it's better to be gaming than it is to be right." Clarified further on: "Sometimes the rules just fail and you can't figure out the right answer. In those cases, play the game in a way that feels the most fair and enjoyable: optimize for happiness." Another foundational rule is to overshare when it comes to your in-game actions: "it's far better to overcommunicate than undercommunicate." Some rules, such as what to do with floor dice, are safely ignored so long as your group develops *some* kind of consensus, and others are highly personality-dependent ("In bluffing games, always believe your significant other. It's better to be wrong than to have to face your partner and tell her you don't believe her when she's telling the truth").

Litorco has rules to cover virtually any conceivable situation, from playing with children ("I consider myself a victory slot machine—sometimes a child playing with me will get a payout of a victory to keep him playing") to gaming with your significant other (see above) or teaching games to nongamers ("If a game's rules more closely resemble a book than a sheet, it's probably too complex to try to explain and too lengthy to be enjoyable for the nongamers in the group"). On that topic, there's an entire chapter on teaching games that even old hands like me could learn from. There's also one on hosting game night, lending and borrowing, and breaking up with a gaming buddy (this matches the general tenor of the section on game groups, which Litorco consistently frequently and insightfully compares to dating). There are genre-specific sections on miniatures-based wargames (no surprise, given Litorco's background) and tabletop roleplaying, as well as tips on attending game conventions, organizing tournaments, making your own player aids and storage solutions, and becoming a "hobby champion," a public face for the joy of tabletop gaming.

The core of the book, however, is not being a dick, and this theme provides some of the book's richest moments. Litorco identifies the three types of dick (the Bearded Gamer, somebody who exploits loopholes to squeeze out a joyless victory; the Rules Lawyer, who endlessly questions the minutiae of the game; and the Incredible Sulk, who resorts to table-flipping and rage-quitting when things don't go his way) and the three breeds of forum troll (the Jilted Kickstarter Backer, the Fanboy, and the Hater) and provides tips on both how to deal with them and how to avoid *being* them.

Whether you're just learning the ropes or planning your first con, there's something here for just about every kind of gamer...if you're patient enough to find it. Next time you sit down to game with friends, family, or tournament-going rivals, remember these words of wisdom: "Ask yourself if you are playing in a spirit that helps fulfill the expectations of fun everyone signed up for."

Thanks, Litorco. I'll file those words alongside Thumper's.