As my honors senior project, I developed a tabletop roleplaying game by the name of Heroics 101. Tabletop RPGs are games of cooperative storytelling in which one individual takes the role of Game Master and describes the game world which the rest of the players interact with via their own characters. In this way, players have the opportunity to immerse themselves in a fictional world and assume the identities of the characters they play, with the only limitations being their own creativity and the structure provided by the game itself. What makes this a “game” instead of simply freeform cooperative narrative is a set of rules which governs the limitations of character abilities and help to determine the outcome of otherwise uncertain scenarios (such as climbing a mountain or attacking an enemy), usually involving the rolling of dice and the adding of numbers.

Different tabletop RPGs offer different experiences based on the approach they take to this internal structure. The most popular tabletop RPGs, such as Dungeons and Dragons, are best suited to simple dungeon adventures focused on slaying monsters as one of a handful of classic archetypes, like the Wizard, Fighter or Rogue. This does pose some problems for players who want a more nuanced experience. My project was an attempt to create a game to address three major areas for improvement I saw in more traditional tabletop RPGs: Rules-World Cohesion, Character Creation, and Option Bloat.

Due to its origin in tabletop wargames, D&D has a lot of unintuitive aspects which make much more sense from a game perspective than from a storytelling one. A perfect example of this is how character progression occurs, where characters gain power from defeating opponents. While perfectly understandable from a purely gamist perspective, it has unintended consequences, such as wizards learning much more efficiently by slaying goblins than by studying. Instances like these run counter to established schema that players have, resulting in a game world that does not seem to agree with the rules, and the breaking of immersion. For these reasons, it’s very important that the rules employed are in agreement with the in-world understandings as off often as possible.

Character creation is the process by which the rules guide the drafting of a new player character, including defining their strengths and weaknesses. This process is continued later in play, as characters grow in power and skill. Traditionally, there are two main approaches to character creation: class-based and point-based. In class-based systems, players select from a handful of common character archetypes, and these classes describe what abilities the character in question gains as they continue through the game (when wizards learn new spells and so forth). While good at delivering on these key archetypes, class-based systems often feel needlessly restrictive, making it difficult to make the character you want to make, with a specific set of abilities which may be across multiple classes (“Multi-classing” often exists, but usually is a sub-optimal choice). Point-based systems circumvent this issue by simply giving players a pool of points with which to purchase skills and abilities, but this leads to players optimizing for a small set of key proficiencies, resulting in characters that feel unnaturally focused. A balance between these two ought to be struck to allow for a high degree of control over the character creation process, without creating unrealistic characters which have obviously been optimized.

The main way that games like these grow and make a profit is by creating and selling additional books of character creation options. While this can be great fun for making new and colorful characters, getting rules to cover archetypes not previously supported, it also leads to rule bloat over time. By the time that Dungeons and Dragons version 3.5 finished production, there were thousands of character
options spread across dozens of books. Novice players of course find this to be dizzying, choice paralysis making it exceedingly difficult to create characters when faced with this overwhelming quantity of options. The most common solution was to have new players use core books only, and to ban problematic books for expert players. The issue remains though that by adding more content, the possibility of unintended interactions (combinations of abilities which are far more potent than either ability independently) grows geometrically, and that at some point players just need to spend hours digging through piles of options to make the character they want. New content is vital for a game to continue to thrive, but a solution needs to be found to prevent option bloat from creating an unfavorable environment for new players and disrupting the balance of the game.

For my game, I created a narrative framework capable of simultaneously addressing all three of these major issues. In my game, Heroics 101, players take the role of incoming students at a fantasy academy which teaches individuals who to deal with a variety of fantastical threats- dragons stealing princesses, necromancers raising armies of the dead, and so on. Gameplay takes place on a set timescale in-game, where players pick which courses they will attend for a given quarter, and then we fast forward to the end of that quarter when player characters have gained new skills and abilities from the courses they picked, which are then used in a field mission, usually taking several in-game days (played out over three or four real-life game sessions), before this cycle repeats. The school setting and control of time flow help to fix a number of world-rules cohesion problems, such as characters now principally advancing via proper education, as well as other issues like crafting rules always making no sense from an economics perspective due to the inherent struggles in balancing a character option with a value highly dependent on the amount of free time characters are given. Courses act as bite-sized packages of skills and abilities, with different courses costing a different number of “Credits” which players have a limited number of to work with each quarter. This works like a point-based system on the surface, where players have a pool of points with which to purchase character options, but in this case the packages are large enough that players often pick up proficiencies they otherwise wouldn’t have focused on, leading to more well-rounded characters while still allowing them to pursue the options they want. Finally, the school setting with abilities through courses helps to diegetically solve the option bloat problem; schools only offer a finite number of courses. While more content may be released, courses are grouped into thematic “clusters” and Game Masters are highly encouraged to control the total number of clusters available to players at any one time, allowing a great degree of control over the mechanic complexity of character creation via control over the number of clusters available.

To test all of this, I performed a pair of two-quarter long playtests, each held once a week for three to four hours, with groups of three to five participants drawn from the student body. These players varied in initial experience with tabletop roleplaying games, ranging from seasoned veterans to individuals who had to be told what tabletop roleplaying games were. These individuals did not need to be provided with any compensation beyond the enjoyment of the game itself (there’s a high demand for people running tabletop games), and they were informed they were free to discontinue their participation at any time. The underlying structure of the game was the primary thing tested, with players creating characters in accordance with the course-based system, and then playing them over the course of in-game missions. The framework turned out to be very intuitive to players old and new, and produced a colorful assortment of characters, exactly the sort I was hoping to see. Over the course of these tests, players reported greatly enjoying the game, and I gathered much valuable feedback which I used to iterate and improve on various aspects of the rules minutia.

While initial responses were very positive, there are many aspects of the game which still require future testing. The test was run with only a small portion of the options which will eventually be
present in the base game, meaning that my applications of nudge theory to help guide player choices were not necessary on this scale. While incomplete, the draft I have submitted is a fully playable version, which I intend to continue working on outside of my time at Western Washington University. In addition to simply filling out the remaining content and polishing the rules, I also have aspirations for an associated website which could be used to house a repository of content in a searchable and ratable fashion to further improve the experience of reading through options to create the characters that players want to make.