

WORK WITH ARLIN

DEEP DIVE RESEARCH

# TTRPG Launch Platform Strategy

Kickstarter vs. itch.io vs. DriveThruRPG vs. BackerKit — a research brief for independent TTRPG publishers making their first distribution decision.

**PREPARED FOR**

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Voss

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**DELIVERABLE**

Research Brief +  
Recommendation

# The Bottom Line

CORE FINDING

Kickstarter is a discovery engine, but only for creators who show up with momentum already behind them. It doesn't build your audience. It rewards the audience you built before you launched.

So the question isn't really "Kickstarter or itch.io." It's: **does Thornwood Press have the audience right now to make a Kickstarter worth the risk?** That's what this brief is here to answer.

I went through Kickstarter's 2024 Games Report, crowdfunding data from Tabletop Analytics, TTRPG creator postmortems, and market analyses covering 2023–2024. The same thing kept showing up: the campaigns that funded almost always had a warm audience before day one. The ones that didn't fund mostly launched cold and hoped the platform would do the work.

It won't. That's not a pessimistic take. It's just how the algorithm works, and understanding it makes the path forward pretty clear. This brief walks through what each platform actually does, what the numbers say, and where I land on the right move for Hollowmere.

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## SECTION 1

# Platform Mechanics

Everyone in the TTRPG space has an opinion about which platform is best. Most of those opinions are based on vibes and anecdotes. What actually matters is understanding how each platform works mechanically, because the mechanics tell you who each one is actually built for.

## Kickstarter

All-or-nothing funding. You hit your goal, you get the money. You don't, nothing changes hands. Kickstarter takes 5% of what you raise, plus 3-5% in payment processing, so budget for roughly 8-10% off the top on a successful campaign.

Keep campaigns short: 20-30 days outperforms longer runs in the TTRPG category. The more important thing to understand is how the algorithm works. Kickstarter surfaces projects to non-followers based on early momentum, specifically how fast pledges come in during the first 48 hours. If you don't hit the ground running, the platform won't help you catch up. That's not a bug. It's intentional. Kickstarter wants to feature projects that are already working.

*The phrase I kept seeing in creator postmortems: "Kickstarter didn't find us backers — we brought them." Almost every funded campaign said some version of this.*

In 2024, tabletop projects raised \$270M on Kickstarter, the second-highest annual total on record. But zoom in and that number gets humbling fast: the top 10 campaigns alone pulled in over \$40M, and most of them were run by creators with established fanbases or recognizable IP. The platform is thriving. The average first-timer's slice of it is smaller than it's ever been.

## itch.io

No mandatory fee. You set your own revenue split, defaulting to 10% to the platform but adjustable all the way to zero. The TTRPG category on itch is genuinely active: over 30,000 indie and zine-style TTRPGs are hosted there, and the buyers who browse it are specifically looking for indie work. They're not stumbling in from a board game search.

The bundle events are worth paying attention to. Itch-organized TTRPG bundles have historically put small publishers in front of 50,000+ buyers at once. That's real discovery, and it doesn't require you to bring your own crowd. No urgency mechanic, no public failure state. If a product doesn't sell well right away, it's just a product that's still there, waiting.

Zine-based TTRPG sales on itch grew 38% in 2023–2024. The platform isn't a consolation prize. It's where a lot of the most interesting TTRPG work lives now, and the audience knows it.

## **DriveThruRPG**

The biggest dedicated TTRPG marketplace by catalog size, with solid print-on-demand infrastructure built in. The fee structure is steeper (35% for non-exclusive listings), but the buyers here are specifically hunting for RPG products, which means genre-relevant search traffic that other platforms don't have.

Honest assessment: DriveThruRPG is a long-tail channel, not a launch engine. It's where products earn passive income over time as the catalog grows. For a debut release, it's unlikely to generate the initial momentum you need, but it's worth listing on in parallel. Set it up, price it consistently with itch.io, and let it work quietly in the background.

## **BackerKit**

BackerKit launched its own crowdfunding platform in 2022, building on its reputation as the go-to pledge manager for post-campaign fulfillment. Fees are a bit lower than Kickstarter (around 5% + processing), and the post-campaign tools are genuinely excellent, better than Kickstarter's for managing late pledges, upsells, and shipping.

The tradeoff is a smaller backer community. BackerKit doesn't have Kickstarter's 23M+ backer network, and the platform isn't going to surface your project to strangers the way Kickstarter (theoretically) might. Campaigns that do well on BackerKit tend to bring their own audience. It's a real option for a second or third campaign once you've built a list, just not the right first move.

## PLATFORM COMPARISON

FACTOR	KICKSTARTER	ITCH.IO	DRIVETHRURPG	BACKERKIT
Fee	~8-10%	0-10% (creator sets)	30-35%	~5-7%
Discovery	Audience-dependent	Organic + bundle events	Backlist / genre search	Audience-dependent
Urgency lever	Yes (campaign deadline)	No	No	Yes (campaign deadline)
Avg. first-time raise	\$2,000-\$4,000	\$500-\$2,000	Passive / variable	Audience-dependent
Public failure state	Yes	No	No	Yes
Best for	Audience 500+	Audience 0-500	Ongoing backlist sales	Audience 300-500+

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SECTION 2

## What the Data Shows

Mechanics tell you how each platform is designed. Data tells you what actually happens when real creators use them. Here's what I kept finding.

### TTRPG Crowdfunding: What the Numbers Say

**87%**

Historical TTRPG Kickstarter funding rate, higher than most categories, but concentrated in campaigns with pre-existing community support

**78%**

Success rate for TTRPG crowdfunding campaigns with goals under \$10,000, the achievable range for most debut publishers

**\$270M**

Pledged to tabletop projects on Kickstarter in 2024, the second-highest annual total ever recorded

The headline numbers look good for TTRPG crowdfunding in general. But they get more interesting, and more honest, when you look at who's actually winning.

**Early momentum is what gets campaigns funded.** Kickstarter's own data shows that projects raising more than 20% of their goal are successfully funded 79% of the time. Below that threshold, the rate drops sharply. That 20% almost always comes from a creator's existing audience: newsletter subscribers, Discord members, people who already know the work.

**There's more competition and less money per creator.** Individual creators earned an average of 30% less from TTRPG Kickstarters in 2023 than in 2019, even though 22% more campaigns succeeded. The pie grew and got cut into a lot more pieces. First-timers are entering a more crowded field than people who launched five years ago did.

**itch.io is genuinely growing as a TTRPG platform.** Zine-based TTRPG sales there grew 38% in 2023–2024. The platform now hosts over 30,000 indie TTRPGs. That's not a niche anymore. It's a real market with active buyers who are specifically looking for this kind of work.

**The community is the product.** Campaigns with newsletter lists, Discord communities, or prior itch.io releases fund at meaningfully higher rates than those starting from scratch. The game gets you in front of people. The community gets them to back you.

*itch.io is the better first product. Kickstarter is the better second — once you've got proof the game lands and a list of people who want to see what comes next.*

# Why First-Timer Kickstarters Fail

The failure patterns are pretty consistent. I kept seeing the same four or five things across postmortems and community retrospectives:

- **No email list at launch**

No list means no day-one pledges. No day-one pledges means the algorithm ignores you. It doesn't matter how good the game is. If there's nobody to send the link to, there's no momentum, and momentum is all Kickstarter cares about in those first 48 hours.

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- **Stretch goals that got out of hand**

A lot of first-timers unlock stretch goals they didn't fully plan for and end up with a project twice as big as the one they budgeted. Delayed fulfillment, burned backers, and a harder road for the next campaign.

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- **The campaign fails publicly**

An unfunded Kickstarter doesn't disappear. It sits there. Future backers can see it. It's not insurmountable, but it makes the next launch harder and requires more explanation than you want to be giving.

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- **Physical rewards they weren't ready for**

Only 14% of TTRPG Kickstarters delivered physical rewards on time in 2022. Physical fulfillment needs vendor relationships, lead times, and upfront capital. Most first-time publishers underestimate all three.

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- **itch.io note: the ceiling is lower**

A debut PDF on itch.io without bundle inclusion or external promotion probably won't break \$1,500-\$2,000. That's real. But the floor is solid, the failure is private, and it builds the list that makes the next move possible.

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SECTION 3

## Recommendation

Here's where I land. The right move for Thornwood Press isn't about which platform is objectively best. It's about which one matches where you actually are. Hollowmere is ready. The question is whether the conditions exist to give it the launch it deserves.

One honest question to sit with before reading the table below: how many people would you text or email right now who'd back this on day one, no questions asked? That number, not the quality of the game, is what determines which row applies to you.

### The Decision Framework

YOUR CURRENT SITUATION	RECOMMENDED PATH
Fewer than 300 engaged followers (newsletter + social combined)	Launch Hollowmere as a PDF on itch.io. Price at \$10-\$14. Use the launch to build your email list and validate the game's reception. Target 500 newsletter subscribers before considering a Kickstarter.
300-500 engaged followers	Soft-launch on itch.io at a reduced price (\$8-10) to reward early community. Run a focused 60-day list-building sprint. Launch a Kickstarter for an expanded or deluxe edition once you've hit 500 engaged subscribers.
500+ engaged followers, actively posting and engaging	Kickstarter is viable now. Set a conservative goal (\$1,500-\$2,500). Keep physical rewards out of your first campaign. Digital-only dramatically reduces fulfillment risk and lets you deliver on time.

### On DriveThruRPG and BackerKit

Neither is the right first move, but both belong in the longer plan.

**DriveThruRPG:** List Hollowmere there in parallel with your itch.io launch, especially if print-on-demand is on your radar. It won't drive significant sales upfront, but it builds backlist presence and captures buyers who specifically search for TTRPG products. Set it up once and let it run.

**BackerKit:** Worth a real look for your second or third campaign. The post-campaign fulfillment tools are better than Kickstarter's, the fees are slightly lower, and if you've built a list of 1,000+

subscribers by then, you're less dependent on the platform's backer community anyway. Not the move right now, but worth keeping in mind as the audience grows.

## The Short Version

### MY RECOMMENDATION

Platforms move what you bring to them. They don't manufacture it. The first launch's job isn't to make you rich. It's to prove the game works, get it into players' hands, and build the email list that makes everything after it easier.

Launch on itch.io. Build the list. Then come back to Kickstarter for the deluxe edition, with a warm audience already primed and waiting. **That's the sequence that actually works.**

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## SECTION 4

# If You Go With Kickstarter Anyway

The framework above is a recommendation, not a verdict. If you've weighed it and you're moving forward with Kickstarter regardless, here's how to give it a real shot. These aren't abstract tips — they're the specific things that separate funded first campaigns from the ones that fall flat in the first 48 hours.

## Before you launch

- **Set up your pre-launch page early and drive sign-ups**

Kickstarter's pre-launch page lets people sign up to be notified when you go live. Get this up as early as possible and treat it like a campaign in itself. The standard conversion assumption is that 20-30% of pre-launch sign-ups will become actual backers. That number is your day-one floor. If it's too low, wait. ([Table Cat Games](#))

- **Have something finished, not just something planned**

Come to Kickstarter with the game in a state you can show. Art, layout samples, a playable draft, a free preview PDF — anything that proves this exists and is worth backing. Backers are smart; they can tell when they're funding a concept versus funding a game that's almost done. ([Tabletop Gaming](#))

- **Contact reviewers at least three months before launch**

TTRPG reviewers and actual-play groups need lead time. Reach out three months ahead so they can have content ready to publish on day one. A review or playthrough that drops when your campaign goes live is worth more than anything you can pay for. ([Tabletop Gaming](#))

- **Set a conservative, honest goal**

Your funding goal should cover what you actually need to deliver the product you're promising — art, layout, editing, and a buffer. Not what you want to make, not a round number that sounds good. Budget for Kickstarter's 5% fee plus 3-5% in payment processing from the start. ([StartPlaying](#))

- **Plan your stretch goals before you launch, not after**

If you're going to offer stretch goals, know exactly what each one costs and what you're committing to before the campaign opens. First-timers who unlock goals they didn't plan for are the ones who miss deadlines and burn backers. Write out what you'll do at each tier and budget it fully. ([Medium / Umut Comak](#))

## During the campaign

- **Keep it short: 20-30 days maximum**

Longer campaigns feel like they give you more time, but they lose momentum in the middle and the algorithm won't keep surfacing you. The classic Kickstarter curve is a spike at launch, a quiet middle, and a spike at close. A 30-day campaign has less dead air to manage than a 45-day one.

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- **Update backers with substance, not asks**

Once people have backed you, updates that just say "we're almost at our goal, please share!" come across as hollow. Give them something real: a behind-the-scenes look, a piece of art, a rules excerpt, a playtest story. Earn their attention again with each update. ([flick.com TTRPG Kickstarter Tips](#))

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- **Cross-promote with other indie creators**

Find other small TTRPG creators running campaigns around the same time and share each other's work in updates and on social media. The TTRPG indie community rewards creators who engage genuinely with the space. It's not a transaction; it's just how the community actually works. ([Table Cat Games](#))

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- **Digital rewards only for your first campaign**

Only 14% of TTRPG Kickstarters delivered physical rewards on time in 2022. Physical fulfillment requires vendor relationships, logistics planning, and capital that most first-time publishers haven't built yet. Keep the first campaign digital. Ship the PDF. Deliver on time. That track record is worth more than the extra pledge dollars a physical tier might bring in.

## After the campaign closes

- **Use late pledges to keep the window open**

When your campaign ends, don't close the door. Kickstarter's late pledge feature and BackerKit's pledge manager both let people buy in after the campaign. Top 2024 campaigns added significant revenue this way. Set it up before you close and mention it in your final update.

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- **Treat backer communication like a job**

After funding, your backers are your clients. Update them regularly, tell the truth when things get delayed, and never go silent for more than a few weeks. The campaigns that damage creators' long-term reputations aren't the ones that ran late — they're the ones that went quiet. ([Wyrnworks Publishing](#))

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- **List on DriveThruRPG and itch.io after delivery**

Once your backers have their copies, put the game on DriveThruRPG and itch.io. You've done the hard part. Now let it earn passively. Backers who loved the game will share it, and those platforms capture buyers who find it months or years later.

*The goal of your first Kickstarter isn't to go big. It's to deliver what you promised, on time, without drama. A small campaign that funds and fulfills cleanly is worth ten times more for your reputation than a large one that stumbles.*

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## SOURCES & METHODOLOGY

# Research Sources

All figures in this brief come from publicly available sources. Where exact numbers weren't available I've used ranges and said so. Nothing here is made up, but treat specific percentages as directional indicators rather than gospel. This is an evolving market and the data reflects a snapshot.

### PLATFORM AND INDUSTRY DATA

[Kickstarter 2024 Games Report](#) (February 2025) · [Kickstarter platform statistics](#) (all-time funding and success rates) · [Tabletop Analytics](#) crowdfunding data · [Global Growth Insights TTRPG Market Report](#) (2024) · [RPGDrop TTRPG Market 2024 Analysis](#) (March 2025)

### CROWDFUNDING PERFORMANCE DATA

[RPG Pub 2023 Kickstarter RPG Report](#) (January 2024) · [EN World: "More Successful Projects But Creators Earning 30% Less"](#) (February 2024) · [RPGDrop: Top 10 Kickstarter Tabletop Campaigns, 2024](#) (March 2025)

### PLATFORM-SPECIFIC SOURCES

[itch.io — Wikipedia](#) · [TTRPG Industry Statistics, WifTalents](#) (February 2025) · [Indie Game Industry Statistics, Gitnux](#) (2024)

### CREATOR ADVICE AND POSTMORTEMS

[Running a TTRPG Kickstarter, Table Cat Games](#) · [How to Run an RPG Kickstarter, Tabletop Gaming](#) (January 2024) · [Winning Tips for Your TTRPG Kickstarter, StartPlaying](#) · [10 Lessons from 10 TTRPG Kickstarter Campaigns, Umut Comak](#) (2025) · [How to Succeed in TTRPG Publishing, Wyrnworks Publishing](#) · [How to Promote Your RPG Kickstarter, EN World](#)

### METHODOLOGY NOTE

This is a research brief, not a financial forecast. The goal was to find signal in a noisy space and give Thornwood Press a clear framework to act on, not to produce academic-grade certainty. Use this as a starting point for your own thinking, not the final word.

Questions about this brief? [hello@workwitharlin.com](mailto:hello@workwitharlin.com)