

This document is part of the **Frontiers Design Documentation**, a set written to teach instead of to instruct. Each entry takes one design problem, explains what that problem is in the wider language of tabletop design, surveys how games have solved it, and then shows what Frontiers does as one worked answer among many.

It is written for several readers at once:

- Designers using Frontiers who want to understand why it works the way it does.
- Designers using Frontiers who want to change it, and need to know what a change will cost.
- Designers building something else entirely, who want the design space mapped before they choose.

Frontiers is a toolkit, and a toolkit is only useful if you can see what each tool is for. None of this is a rule; the rules live in the Rulesets, and what follows is the reasoning, the history, and the alternatives.

There will be terminology here that is unfamiliar to casual players. Treat this documentation as advanced content, written for designers interested in building. It will not teach you every term or phrase it uses, but it will do its best to define them as they arrive.

It covers two decisions, **Scope** and **Genre**: how big the game is, and what veneer it wears.

These two topics share a document because they are made together, and because a game that settles one while ignoring the other tends to struggle to hamfist the idea in later in the design process. Because of this, it is best advised to decide on both as a pair, or mantle the weight of all the backtracking down the line.

Unlike most of this documentation, this entry focuses on decisions with no subsystem behind them, and there is no Frontiers rule for either, so the Variants and Alternatives that close every other document are missing here: there is nothing to vary. That being said, you are free to reference the Starter Sets as examples of a few of the Scope-Genre mashups open to you, along with the other games mentioned throughout.

What is Scope

Scope is how large a game is: the size of the people in it, and the scale of the reality they find themselves in. A game about four friends robbing a bank and a game about four friends halting the heat death of the universe are built from the same kinds of parts, yet almost every way those parts are judged and designed can change drastically.

To give a well-known example, Chaosium's Call of Cthulhu puts ordinary people (a professor, a journalist, a private detective) against things older than reality as we know it. The investigators never become powerful, continent-moving gods; they become informed, which is worse for them,

and the game is built so the gap between what they can reasonably do and what the world throws at them is always somewhat misaligned. Every other decision in that system follows from the gap. The lethality, the sanity track, advancement that moves sideways instead of up: each makes sense once you know the Scope it was written to serve.

That is one answer to three important questions, and while some systems don't answer all of them, they at least implicitly try to:

1. **Where does power start, and where does it end?** The floor and the ceiling: how capable a character is in their first scene, and how capable they are allowed to become.
2. **How far does it travel during play?** The distance between those two. It is a separate decision, and the one most often made by accident.
3. **What can the characters achieve?** Their reach, whether a street, a city, a kingdom, or a cosmos. Reach is separate from power, and the interesting games are usually the ones where the two do not match.

Call of Cthulhu is the sharp case for the third question. The power is tiny, the stakes are the largest in the genre, and the mismatch between them is the design.

Why Scope matters

Scope is the decision that sets your other numbers before you know you are setting them.

Decide that characters are fragile people facing something vast, and you have already half-written your damage values, your healing rate, your advancement curve, and how forgiving a failed roll is allowed to be. Decide that characters climb from unremarkable to world-altering, and you have committed to a progression system that must carry them however-many steps without the math falling apart at either end. Neither is a Scope rule; both are consequences bred from indecisive design, and if you choose to have your Scope mismatch what you want to tell in your story, you will find yourself backtracking to fix that problem.

That is why Scope gets half a document of its own. Nobody notices an unchosen Scope as a Scope problem. It shows up a year later as a math problem: enemies that stopped being threatening, a spell that trivializes the campaign's central obstacle, a party that outgrew the map. While the causes of the mistake vary, there are many unknown or little-known games that stem from the 800-pound gorilla that is Wizards of the Coast's 5e SRD, and suffer for it, because their Scope of play doesn't conform to how that ruleset presents itself and thus the designers accidentally gain all the problems that 5e's designers have struggled with for over a decade.

The opposite end version of the same failure is more common. A designer picks a floor and a ceiling without noticing they have also picked a distance, and the distance is what breaks. A twenty-level climb and a five-level climb are different engineering problems even with identical endpoints, because one of them has to stay interesting four times as long.

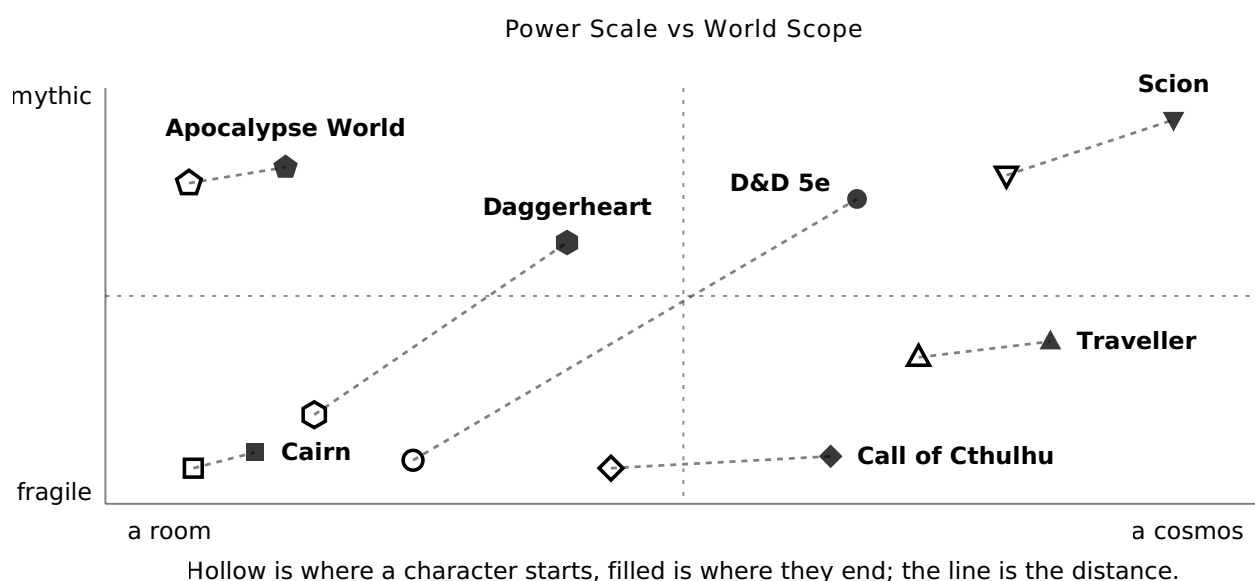
How big are the people in your game, how big is the thing they are facing, and how much does either of those things change by the end?

Answer that, and the rest of this documentation becomes a series of smaller, more precise questions.

The Approaches

No scale is correct, and unusually for this documentation there is no dominant tradition to react against either. Games are spread across the whole space, which says less about an unsolved problem than about what Scope is: the one decision a system makes purely about what it wants to be.

Seven examples cover a lot of what most games tend to do. That is not to say they are the only options open to you, and plenty of games sit between two of them or borrow from several at once.



Small people, enormous danger

The floor is low, the ceiling is barely above it, and the threat is out of all proportion to both. Call of Cthulhu is the canonical case, and most of the horror tradition sits alongside it.

This shape buys dread, which is hard to manufacture any other way. A threat that can be beaten is a challenge; a threat that cannot is an atmosphere, and the gap between character and world does the work a monster statblock would otherwise carry. Small things matter a lot as a result: a loaded revolver or an unlocked door is a real asset when the character has little else.

What it rules out is the long arc. With nowhere to climb, a campaign has to find its momentum in what the characters learn and lose rather than in what they become, and a table expecting to grow stronger will feel the absence.

Small people, small world

Power and reach both stay low. Yochai Gal's Cairn and much of the stripped-down tradition work here: three attributes, very little advancement, and a scale where a well-lit room and a sharp knife are enough to decide things.

It is the cheapest Scope to build and the hardest to build badly. With no climb to engineer, the numbers never have to hold at a higher tier, and every rule can be tuned for one altitude. Play runs fast, lethal, and resourceful; preparation matters more than optimization.

What it gives up is the long campaign. A character who ends roughly where they started is the intended effect rather than a failure of design, and it suits short, dangerous play far better than a two-year game.

Competent at the start, competent at the end

The floor is high and the ceiling is just above it. Mongoose Publishing's Traveller builds characters out of careers already lived, so a starting character arrives as a trained professional with a history behind them, and advancement afterward is slow and narrow by design.

A high floor lets a game skip the apprenticeship and open at the altitude it wants to run at, so the first session is already the game. Because the band is narrow, a threat written in the first week of design is still a threat in the last week of the campaign, and that alone can save a designer months of work.

Growth stops being the engine of play, though, so the game has to want something else in its place: a ship to pay off, a world to map, a reputation to build.

The long climb

The floor is low, the ceiling is very high, and the distance between them is what the game is for. The 5e SRD is the reference most designers have already absorbed whether they meant to or not, and Paizo's Pathfinder runs a comparably long arc with a considerably wider build space laid over it.

The appeal is plain. Growth is the most legible reward a game can offer, and a character who began unable to survive a pack of dogs and ends the campaign negotiating with something planar has a story told in their own numbers.

The price is engineering, and it is steep. Everything has to work at the bottom, at the top, and at every step in between: encounter math that scales, a difficulty curve that holds its shape, and content worth playing at each altitude. It is the most expensive Scope to execute and by far the easiest to underestimate, and the usual failure is a system tuned well for its first third and increasingly approximate after that.

Legendary from the first scene

The floor is already far above ordinary and the ceiling is higher still. Onyx Path Publishing's Scion opens with the players as children of gods caught up in a war against the Titans, and the arc climbs from there into the divine.

Starting at altitude means the game never has to apologize for what the characters are. Nothing is held back for later tiers, the fiction can be epic from the opening scene, and the system spends all its attention on one register instead of three.

Ordinary stakes stop working, though. A locked door is no obstacle to a demigod, so the game has to keep supplying threats at its own scale, and the quiet human moments other games get for free have to be deliberately built back in by hand.

Enormous people, small world

The floor is already high and the world is deliberately kept tiny. Lumpley Games' Apocalypse World is the clearest case: a Hardholder runs a settlement, a Brainer reaches into other people's heads, a Driver owns the only working vehicle for fifty miles, and the whole campaign happens within a few days' travel of one hardhold. Buried Without Ceremony's Monsterhearts takes the shape further; the characters are vampires and werewolves, and the world is a single high school.

This inverts the horror trade. The characters are the largest things in their own world, so pressure cannot come from a threat scaled to match them; it has to come from each other, and the game gets a kind of friction that a wider world dilutes. It is also cheap to build. There is no climb to engineer and no need for the numbers to hold at a second altitude, and a world a few miles across can be written in specifics rather than in regions.

What it gives up is anywhere to go. The campaign runs on relationships and consequences because there is nothing else to escalate into, and a table that wants to march on the capital will hit the edge of the map long before it hits the edge of its characters.

Scale as a narrative question

A different kind of answer: some games never express scale as a number at all.

Darrington Press's Daggerheart runs on a duality roll of Hope and Fear, where the two dice decide both whether something worked and which way the table's momentum swings. What it asks of a scene is how much weight the moment carries. Evil Hat's Fate does something related, sizing an outcome to what the fiction will support rather than to a power band, and Apocalypse World works the same way underneath its playbooks.

This buys wide range at no engineering cost. The same rules handle a conversation and a cataclysm, since the system was never measuring altitude, and a character can have a mythic moment in session one without anything breaking.

In exchange, the table has to supply the sense of scale that the numbers leave out. Nothing in the rules tells anyone how big this is supposed to be, which works well when everyone shares the same picture and badly when they do not.

Underneath all seven is a trade between **range and tuning**. The wider the band a game covers, the more there is to engineer and the more of the design budget goes on keeping the math alive across it; the narrower the band, the more precisely each rule can be aimed and the less there is to grow into. No point on that line is correct, and none of them is off limits to you. The work is choosing one yourself rather than inheriting it from whichever game you read first.

Genre

Scope is how big the game is; Genre is what it looks like.

The quickest way to keep them apart is that **Genre is the veneer and Scope is the feel**. It is a useful rule with one catch: the veneer turns out to be structural. Genre decides what the threats are, the threats decide what counts as a conflict (the subject of the next document), and conflict decides most of your numbers. A choice that looks like art direction comes back three steps later as a damage formula.

If you're in a fantasy setting, you often have basic armors and magic; if you're in sci-fi you could have those, but could also have tech mechanics, shields, batteries, and more to keep in mind.

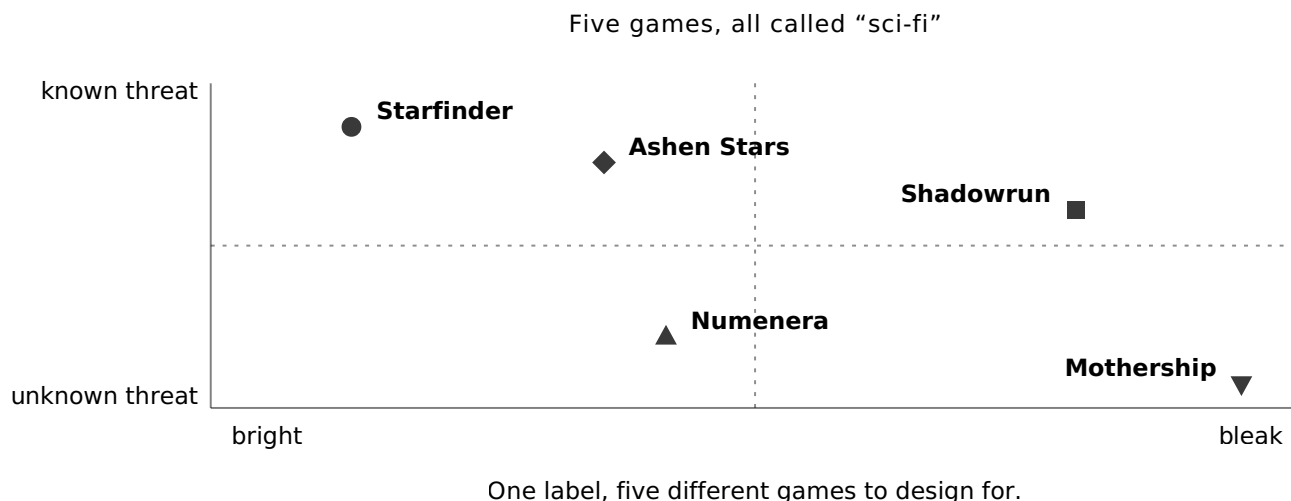
Don't limit your Genre to a term

Naming a genre feels like a decision, and mostly it is not one. Saying you are building a sci-fi game, for example, actually narrows very little: sci-fi is at least five games that share a word and not much else.

Paizo's Starfinder is science fantasy in the bright register: magic and starships in the same sentence, a technomancer standing beside a soldier, and threats you can mostly fight. Monte Cook Games' Numenera points science fantasy in the opposite direction. Set a billion years out, it has a medieval society living among the leftovers of eight earlier civilizations, remnants its publisher describes as inscrutable and as powerful as magic. It is sci-fi by setting and fantasy by feel, and its threats are mostly things nobody understands.

Pelgrane Press's Ashen Stars is sci-fi as procedural. The characters are freelance troubleshooters and law enforcers who take work on contract, and their reputation decides which contracts come in and whether the ship stays flying. Tuesday Knight Games' Mothership is sci-fi where the threat cannot be beaten at all: stress accumulates, panic spreads between crew, and the ship is failing underneath you. Catalyst Game Labs' Shadowrun is the cyberpunk register, where the world is already owned, the characters are deniable, and the best available outcome is another job.

This is all to say, exasperatingly, that there are a lot of choices in one Genre umbrella, so never feel the need to limit yourself or your creativity to a specific lens just because of the logic.



All five are sci-fi, and a damage model that serves any one of them is wrong for the other four. Starfinder wants hit points that climb; Mothership wants a stress track that barely resets; Ashen Stars wants clues that cannot be missed and a reputation worth protecting. The word narrows nothing: not the elements, and not the shape. A designer who stops at it will build the loop they have played most, then wonder why the finished game feels like something else in costume.

Every genre works this way. Fantasy is Conan, Tolkien, and a village where nothing has happened in two hundred years; horror is a haunted house, a slasher, and a slow administrative dread. The label is only where the decision starts.

Tone sits under Genre

Tone is the register you choose inside a genre, and it does more of the work than the genre does.

Suppose you set out to build cosmic horror. So far that phrase has told you very little. Is it Victorian, with the horror arriving by letter and the investigators spending their evenings in archives and asylums? Is it science fiction horror, with the thing found in a derelict and nowhere left to run? Is the unknowable an artificial intelligence, where a lot of current writing puts it, turning the genre into a conversation you are slowly losing? All three are cosmic horror. Each asks the characters to spend their sessions doing something different, and the rules have to support whichever one you picked.

It also explains why tone turns up all over this documentation instead of in one place. The Variants sections of the other documents are full of it: grittier, pulpier, fast and lethal, a grind. Those are all tone dials. They read as scattered because tone is a bias applied across every subsystem, and it only holds together if you decide it once, here, before the subsystems exist.

Make the loop feel like the Genre

Here is one test worth running before you write a single rule.

Write down what happens in a typical hour of your game. Skip the premise and describe the hour: what the players say, what they roll, what changes on the sheet. Then strip out every proper noun and every piece of art direction, hand it to somebody else, and ask them to name the genre.

If the hour reads as roll initiative, spend three rounds reducing a number, take the loot, you have written a dungeon loop. Plenty of good games are built on it, and there is nothing wrong with building another. It still will not read as horror, though, and painting it black will not change that. A mystery wants an hour where information is scarce; survival wants an hour where something is visibly running out; cyberpunk wants an hour where the job costs you something you cannot buy back. Art direction can do none of that, and designers reach for it first because it is the fun part.

What does your game look like, which register are you playing it in, and would an hour of it still be recognizable as that with the names taken out?

Scope & Genre in Frontiers

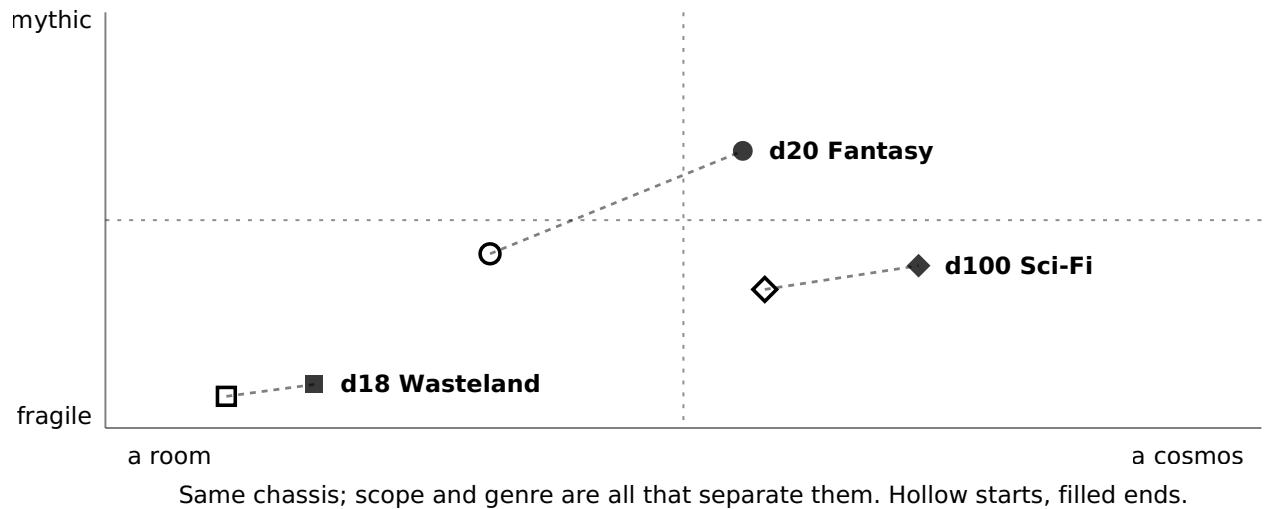
Elsewhere in the set, this is where a document explains what Frontiers does. Here the answer is a little circular, because Frontiers is the thing you are reading.

The engine has no Scope and no Genre, and it cannot have either. It ships no species, no classes, no setting, no power ceiling, and no list of what a character can become, because all of that is content, and the engine is built on keeping structure and content apart. Both decisions are yours. They are probably the first things you decide and the last anyone else can decide for you.

One caveat. The engine is not perfectly neutral, and its naming is where that shows. ⚡ Energy, ⓧ Wounds, Ⓣ Fatigue, a ⓧ Wound track that caps at five: the vocabulary leans slightly grounded, toward people who tire and bleed rather than beings who do not. The lean is only in the words, so renaming them removes it. A game about gods can call the same track something else and the math will not notice.

What the engine does offer is worked examples. The three Starter Sets share one chassis and differ on both axes at once, with three scales and three Genres between them. They show better than any argument how much of a game's character comes from content and how little from rules.

One engine, three scopes



D18 WASTELAND

The world is awful and you are walking in it. Characters are survivors more than heroes, the reach is short, and most sessions ask whether you get through the day with what you brought. The genre is post-apocalyptic and the tone attritional, which is why an hour of play is about the road and what it costs, and less about who is standing in it.

D100 SCI-FI

Grittier than it first looks. The setting is worn down and mostly indifferent, but the characters are capable within it: closer to a working crew who are very good at one thing than to people merely enduring. Of the five registers above, it lands nearest the procedural one, where the work comes in and the interesting part is usually who else wanted it.

D20 FANTASY

Heroic fantasy, played straight. Characters are strong out of the gate and the scale is openly adventurous, which is the register the d20 suits best. Its tone is the brightest of the three, chosen so the set reads as the baseline the other two depart from.

Three Scopes, three Genres, one chassis, and no rules for either in the engine. Every difference comes from the content laid over it: what the threats are, how much is at stake, what the characters are assumed to be in the first session, and what an hour of play is spent doing.

Where this leaves you

There are no Variants or Alternatives here, since there is no Frontiers rule to replace. In their place are two decisions to make before you open the rest of the set, and one way of checking you have made them.

Write down five sentences:

1. What a character can do in their first scene.
2. What a character can do in their last.
3. The largest thing in the game they could plausibly affect.
4. Which register of your genre you are in, stated precisely enough to rule something out.
5. What a typical hour of play consists of, with the proper nouns removed.

The first three are your Scope and the last two are your Genre. If any of them is hard to write, it is worth settling before you start choosing dice; every document that follows will make more sense if you arrive holding all five.

Conflict is the natural next read. This document sets how big the game is and what it looks like; Conflict asks what the game is about once something in it resists.